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DEADWOOD DICK'S DOUBLE;

OR,

BY

The Ghost of Gorgon's Gulch.

EDWARD L. WHEELER,
Author of "Deadwood Dick Novels," etc., etc.



"ONE! git ready. TWO! say yer kittenchisms. THREE! balance yerself fer the final send-off. And lastly—'KENO!'"

Deadwood Dick's Double;

OR,

The Ghost of Gorgon's Gulch.

A TALE OF WILD-CAT CITY.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,
AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE COLONISTS.

THROUGH the dying sunlight of one of Autumn's most beautiful days, a "train" of white-topped prairie "schooners" wound through a tortuous and wild mountain gulch, over an equally rough and rugged stage road, or trail, drawn by horses that looked gaunt and weary.

There were four wagons, drawn by two teams each; then there were three persons in advance, upon horseback—a lady and two gentlemen.

Each wagon was manned with a stalwart, sturdy driver, and that there were other persons beneath the canvas canopy was evident by occasional shouts of laughter.

The trio in advance were armed with rifles, but did not appear apprehensive of danger, as they rode leisurely along.

The eldest of the party was Judson Elliott, the leader of the band of colonists, whose pilot he now was; the next eldest was Alf Montague, also one of the party, a stalwart, good-looking fellow, aged six-and-twenty, and some twenty years "Judge" Elliott's junior. The last was Ethel Elliott, the colonist's daughter, and one of the prettiest, most vivacious little creatures ever seen in the wild mountain districts.

She was just at the threshold of blooming womanhood—eighteen—small in stature, as compared with the brawny, stalwart son of Old Virginia, Alf Montague, but most gracefully formed and developed.

Her face was clear and finely-chiseled, her eyes a dusky beaming brown, her hair of the same hue and grown in great luxuriance, although it was now tossed in wild disorder over her shoulders, by the ruthless mountain breeze.

She was attired in a coarse but serviceable riding habit, and wore a jaunty straw hat upon her head.

Judson Elliott was a man of stately bearing, whose habitual graveness would have led one to believe that he was ever brooding over some great trouble, either of the past, or that was foreshadowed in the future. He was rather prepossessing in appearance, his countenance betokening a man of sound sense and judgment, mastered passions, and an iron will.

His eyes were dusky, and hair of a like hue, while his sweeping beard was liberally sprinkled with silver threads.

Montague, in face was not unhandsome, with his "character" features, brown eyes, hair and mustache.

At least, so thought pretty Miss Ethel, who worshiped him as the hero of her life. It was quietly considered that they were lovers, although no public announcement had been made to that effect. Young Montague had followed the colonists all the way from Virginia, and the wise ones of the train predicted a wedding as soon as the colony should be planted.

Among those comprising the colonists, there were the Elliotts, Judson, Ethel and Royce, her brother; the Hansons, two females and four males; the Warwicks, three females and two males; the St. Celtons, two females, four males, and Alf Montague and Lewis Lyons—the latter a roving genius who had joined the train in Kansas.

For three months the colonists had been unceasingly upon the road, and now they began to look forward in hopes of reaching their destination.

Gorgon Gulch, through which they were toiling, was one of the labyrinthian tributaries to the many approaches to the great Carbonate regions surrounding Leadville, and they had now left that enterprising city about ten miles to the south.

"Cat City cannot be very far away, if we have been rightly informed," Judge Elliott said, as they rode on. "We were told that it was five miles from the forks, and it must be that we have come that far, already."

"That is my idea of it," Montague replied, "and I have been eagerly watching for the last hour, to get a glimpse of the promised land."

"Now, don't set your expectations too high,

Alf," pretty Miss Ethel said, smiling, "for something tells me that you will get disappointed. I do not imagine that we will find a Philadelphia or a New York, up here among these frowning mountains."

"Nor I, but we have been assured by the land-agents that we should find a small village, and plenty of land suitable for agricultural purposes."

"As undoubtedly we shall," Elliott agreed, gravely. "By the way, yonder is a bend in the canyon, and beyond it seems to be lighter. Perhaps we are at the end of our journey?"

With considerable eagerness they spurred forward around the bend, leaving the train to follow at its leisure.

Beyond the bend, where the canyon-gulch narrowed down to a mere gap, they soon beheld their destination.

No town, however, nor even a village was there—simply a large, rude cabin, by the trail, and a shed that probably answered the purpose of a barn.

That was all.

The cosy little village they had been advised of, was dissipated in the bare reality of what they saw.

The country was nearly in keeping with the other prospects. To be sure, the gulch had widened into a pocket valley of several hundred acres, but the land was for a most part timbered and rocky, and a wild-looking place at the best.

The valley or pocket was basin-shaped, mountains of stupendous size rising on every side, and looking grimly uninviting with their dense coverings of scrub pine timber. Across the valley was another gap similar to that through which our party had entered, and this was the continuation of the Gorgon Gulch trail to the northward.

Involuntarily the three colonists drew rein, as they arrived at the edge of the valley, and exchanged glances—glances of mingled astonishment and dissatisfaction at the prospect revealed.

Was this the place that they had traveled so many miles to reach?

Was this the (said to be) famous Wild-Cat City that they had been led to believe was a village of great promise? It would seem so.

Some months before, Judson Elliott, while in New Orleans on business, had encountered a glib-tongued individual who claimed to be a mighty speculator of valuable Western lands. Particularly was he eloquent over one parcel of territory containing a village named Wild Cat City, all of which he claimed to own by right of absolute purchase, and was willing to dispose of at reasonable figures, or exchange for Eastern estates.

Elliott was the possessor of a small and not very productive farm in Northern Virginia, and having always had a desire to locate in the booming West, he proposed that the agent take a look at his land, with a view to exchange.

The agent did take a look, and as a result traded the Cat City tract for the estates of Elliott, Hanson, Warwick and St. Celton, giving them some cash and a deed of one hundred acres of land, each, in exchange for their respective farms.

That was the explanation of the formation of the Elliott colony and its journey westward. The agent had described the land as fair and level a valley as ever the sun shone upon, free from any obstructions whatever, and ready for the plow.

"It is just as I expected; we have been sold!" Ethel exclaimed, breaking the silence. "We have left a cosy home for a howling wilderness."

"By Heaven, you are right," the Judge replied; "but here we are, and must make the best of an unenviable situation, instead of crying over spilt milk. I had no idea of being cheated in this manner. Let's ride on to the cabin, and see who is usurping our premises."

Accordingly they galloped forward until they reached the great two-story log structure, and drew rein before one great door, over which was a rude sign:

"CAT CITY CASINO."

Two men stood before the door, with hands thrust in their leathern breeches pocket, and grimy clay pipes in their mouths—the one a typical Californian, buckskin clad, with long gaunt features, a hook nose, sandy hair and beard and big feet—the other a fat, greasy, flat-faced Chinaman.

The garments of each were dirty, their battered white plug hats were perforated numerously with bullet holes, and both were armed to the teeth.

There was something sinister in the expression of the Californian's countenance, as our colonists rode up, but he nodded, good-naturedly, and even condescended to remove his pipe from his mouth and stare hard at pretty Ethel.

"Good-afternoon," Judge Elliott said, bowing. "Could you tell me if this is the place called Wild-Cat City?"

"I reckon I can," the Californian replied. "You're right in ther heart o' ther great metropolis, ef ther old court knows herself, an' this hyar ranch of mine, it be ther capitol."

"But, my good friend, we were led to suppose that there was a little village here, with a population of about a half-hundred souls?"

"Kent help thet, pilgrim. Ye kin see ther size o' ther city 'thout gittin' up on the mounting an' lookin' over et wi' a spy-glass, an' as ter ther souls I reckon me an' my man Sing Song be about ther likeliest an' earthliest inhabitants, bein's we're ther founders o' ther city as ye now parseve it."

"And do you mean to say that you and your companion are the only inhabitants?" Montague asked.

"We allow we aire," the Californian averred, with due self-pride. "I'm old Bill Myers, from Californy. We kim down heer an' built the city, all by ourselves, an' when et grows a leetle, we calkulate ter be jin't Mayor an' Boss, we do. Oh! Cat City hain't no New York, ner Leadville, but et's bound ter blaze, byme-by. Ther stage halts heer fer dinner, on ets way north, an' occasionally sum pilgrim smells good liquid paralysis down this way, and stops fer a sample. So ye see Cat City hain't no dead town yet."

"Not half so dead as it ought to be," Alf Montague grunted. "How about it, Judge—what shall we do?"

"Stop here," was the reply. "We've made our bed, and may as well occupy it. By the way, Mr. Myers, I suppose you can tell me about how many acres of land there is in this basin?"

"Some'es about four hundred acres, I allow!"

"Ah! then we have not been much deceived as to the amount of the land. You see we have purchased this basin, or four hundred acres of it, and have come to take possession. I presume you have no objections?"

"Waal, no, not so long as ye don't disturb me, an' my shanty, heer. But, I allow meb-be ye won't like to locate, fer all."

"In what respect?"

"Oh! beca'se thar's another galoot what claims ownership, an' he makes et red-hot fer 'em as tries ter squat heer. He calls himself Deadwood Dick, an' he's a hard customer ter handle."

"Oh! I think I have read of the fellow. A road-agent, isn't he?"

"Yes, he used ter be, but they say as how he has retired, now. He claims ter hev staked out this valley fer his own use, an' won't allow nary a usurp."

"How is it that you are here, then?"

"Oh! he see'd et would be an advantage ter hev a howtel, heer, an' so let me plant my ranch fer half o' my profits. That's how!"

"Well, Mr. Deadwood Dick and our colony must be enemies, then, for we shall certainly take possession of the tract," Judge Elliott said, decidedly. "We traded for it, and we shall hold it, before the muzzle of the rifle. Alf, you may ride back and hurry up the teams. We must strike tents yet, to-night. Perhaps we can get something to eat at this tavern?"

"Most sartengly you can," Myers hastened to assure. "Jest dismount ther ledly an' fetch her in. We've got good b'ar-stake, an' fust-class whisky, an' don't you fergit it."

"You may give us the bear-stake, in preference to the whisky," the Judge said, gravely.

A dismount was made, and Ethel and her father were conducted into a sort of waiting-room adjoining the bar-room.

The train soon arrived, and the wagons were corraled in an open space not far from the Casino, and the weary horses turned loose to graze.

Tents were then taken from the wagons, and while the women were taken to the Casino, the sturdy colonists began to erect their temporary homes, until they could have a chance to rear permanent structures of a more substantial character.

Not long was it ere the white tents were dotted about, and bright camp-fires blazing before them, around which the colonists were grouped in clusters, discussing the prospects of their new homes.

Not a very cheering prospect was it, to say the least, with a howling wilderness surrounding them.

Judge Elliott and Ethel stood in the door of the Casino, conversing with the man, Myers, when hoof-strokes were heard coming down the trail, and a horseman soon dashed up at a gallop, and drew rein near the camp-fires.

"Ah! as I expected," old Bill grunted. "Et's Chris Carleton, one o' Deadwood Dick's fellers, an' as tough a cuss as evyer sipped lik'er. An' I'll allow he's come down ter tell ye ter get up an' git."

"He shall have his answer, then, as soon as he asks for it," Judge Elliott, replied, decidedly. "Be he as fierce as an African lion, he cannot scare me!"

"Nor me, papa!" Ethel said, with a merry laugh. "I can be as brave as a soldier, you know."

The horseman evidently made inquiries of those about the camp-fires, for he soon turned and galloped toward the tavern.

He drew rein as he beheld the Judge and his daughter.

"I'm searchin' fer ther man thet heads this colony!" he said. "Ef you're ther galoot, why you're ther one I want."

"Well, sir, I am undoubtedly the party you seek," the Judge said, stiffly.

CHAPTER II.

THE WARNING.

"AND, if you want to snag yourself against a small-sized hurricane, for instance, here's me!" Ethel exclaimed, bravely.

The ruffian uttered a low cry of admiration and amazement, as he saw her.

He was a man of medium stature, clad from head to foot in black-dyed buckskin, and armed to the teeth—an evil-looking personage, with swarthy skin, bead-like black eyes, and hair and mustache and imperial to match. While hovering upon his face was an expression so evil and sinister as to need no other proof that he was a thoroughbred villain.

Out in those far Western tracts of gold and peril, a man is never judged so critically by his deeds as by the expression of his countenance. It is by this that the character of the "beast" is taken, and the mode rarely, if ever, fails to be correct in determining the nature of the party in question.

No second glance, therefore, had a person to take to assure himself Chris Carleton was a man of evil inclinations, to say the least.

Judge Elliott knew it at once, but did not tremble.

Many a rough and lawless character had he encountered during his life, but never had he been over-matched.

"I am Judson Elliott, the leader of the colony," he repeated, folding his arms across his breast, "and if you have anything to say to me, why say it, and be gone!"

"Oho! don't git quite so authoritative, now!" Carleton sneered, fiercely. "Ef ther old court knows herself, we generally cum an' go when we please. And, as I remarked before, ef you're Judson Elliott, leader o' these squatters, you're ther very galoot we want ter see. My name's Carleton—Chris Carleton, fer long, an' I'm sort o' lieutenant to Capt'n Deadwood Dick, who owns these lands in these hyar surroundings, an' I've cum down ter warn ye ter git up an' git!"

"Then you have put yourself to considerable trouble for nothing, as we flatly refuse to git!" the Judge answered, positively. "As a colony, we have purchased and paid for the lands in this valley, and we intend to hold our own, no matter what claims others may have."

Carleton uttered an oath.

"You'll mighty quick change yer mind on that," he said, fiercely.

"Heer's a leetle dockymint frum Capt'n Dicky, tellin' ye what ye kin expect, ef ye don't puckachee!"

And as he spoke, the lieutenant drew an envelope from his pocket, and tossed it toward the Judge, who, in turn, caught and opened it.

Within was a sheet of paper, written over in a straggling hand, the contents of which was substantially as follows:

To all whom it may concern:

"Know ye, by these presents, that I, Deadwood Dick, alias Edward Harris, road-agent and outlaw-at-large, do claim right of possession and absolute ownership of the tract of land in Cat City Basin, having duly surveyed it and staked it out as my claim, from the Government. Know ye, also, that said tract of territory being mine, I will not tolerate intrusion, or usurpation in any way or manner whatever. Parties who squat upon the tract will be duly

warned by such a document as this, to vacate, within ten hours after its receipt. If they refuse, I shall forthwith declare war against them, by causing bonfires to be built on the surrounding mountain tops, after which they need look for no mercy from my band. Cat City belongs to Deadwood Dick, and not to you, and, therefore, if you value your lives and your liberty, you will pack up your effects and fold your tents and steal away.

"Remember! Your lives shall pay the sacrifice, if you remain ten hours in the valley, after the reception of this, and you shall know that Deadwood Dick never commands but to be obeyed, or the offender punished.

(Signed:)

DEADWOOD DICK."

Word for word the Judge read the warning; then handed it to Ethel, while he turned to the courier:

"You may go, sir, as soon as you choose, and tell this Deadwood Dick that we will not vacate!" he said, sternly. "I have no desire to incur his enmity—neither am I afraid of him. We have the deeds for the four hundred acres of land in this valley, and we shall hold them at the muzzle of our rifles. Go, tell him this, and tell him, also, that he had better think twice before he attacks us. This is all I have to say, in behalf of the colonists."

"Keerect! Ther Capt'n shall know yer reply," Carleton replied, with a sinister leer. "An', by ther way, ye'd better get out yer hymn-books o' glory, fer we don't generally allow much time for camp-meetin' when we light down on a gang."

And with a brutal laugh the *avant courier* dug his spurs savagely into the sides of his horse, and dashed away over the northward trail.

The colonists had by this time mostly gathered by the tavern door, and at a request Judge Elliott read the warning of the noted mountain outlaw.

There was a murmur of indignation in the crowd, when he had finished.

"This is about the cheekiest thing I've heard of yet," Alf Montague declared. "You colonists gave up your homes in exchange for this tract, and you are fools if you don't fight for it. That's my say; and I can back it to the muzzle. If Deadwood Dick wants war he can have dead loads of it, so far as I am concerned. Eh! boys—what do you say?"

"Ay! ay!" was the hearty response from a dozen throats. "If Deadwood Dick wants war, we'll give him his fill!"

"Yes, we will!" Judge Elliott assented, approvingly. "I am not generally in favor of pitched battles, but right is right, and in fighting for the possession of this gulch, I candidly believe we are but doing right. There are fourteen men of us, strong and rugged, and I trust that we can give the rival claimant all he wants. To-morrow we will build a block-house, or fort, where we can better protect ourselves."

Ten miles up Gorgon's Gulch, to the north of Cat City, a simple and unpretentious cabin stood in a little clearing on the mountain side. The clearing was planted with garden vegetables, with here and there a bed of cultivated flowers. A little vine-wr-athed porch shaded the single door; a little path led through the wood to the stage trail a score of rods below; a bubbling mountain brook gurgled down across the clearing through its pebbly channel, with musical vehemence.

It was a cosey, pretty spot for a home—a place where two loving, contented hearts might dwell and dwell, and never know the pains or cares of a bustling, restless world.

Upon the bright sunny morning of the day following the colonists' arrival at Cat City, a young woman of pretty face and form stood in the doorway of the isolated cabin, in a listening attitude.

That she was expecting some one was evident, for she started forward with a little joyous cry as a horseman suddenly dashed from the woods and across the clearing to the door, where he drew rein and leaped from the saddle, to receive her into his arms.

A handsome fellow he was, at a glance, with a smooth face and dusky eyes, which corresponded in color with his garments, which were black, from the top-boots upon his feet, to the jaunty slouch hat upon his head.

"Dick, Dick! I am so glad you came, to-day, for I was getting so lonesome, with no one to talk to," the little woman said, returning his warm caress. "Tell me, did you succeed in your case?"

"Of course, *ma petite* Edith," the new-comer replied, leading the way into the cabin. "Did you ever know Phineas Porter to lose a case he undertook? The missing money had been stolen by a step-son, who of course had a woman in the case."

"And now, you will stay at home with me ever so long, before you go away again, won't you," Edith said, coaxingly. "If you but knew how lonely it is when you're gone you'd not go away."

"I daresay it is, dear, and I would be with you ever, were it not for my calling."

"Give up that calling, then. There are others, in plenty, to fill your place."

"Perhaps so, but I do not think you understand my nature, even yet, darling. I could not exist without excitement. It has been the one demand of my past life as it must be of the future. When I have plenty of excitement I am at home; when excitement flags, I am dull and stupid. Since I left road-agency, though firmly resolved to quiet down, I have found it a tough struggle, and were it not for what little I do in the detective line, I should expire, I fear. This is not because I do not love you—indeed no, for you are the sweetest treasure of my life, Edith. But you know I have been wild and untamed so long that restlessness has grown to be a second nature to me."

"I suppose you are right, my husband, but—but—" and here the little girl-wife broke down, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

"There! there, pet, don't cry, please don't," Deadwood Dick said, gathering her to his breast. "I have but one more case—then, if you say so, I will not leave you again."

"Oh! Dick! will you really, truly? I should be so much happier," and Edith's pretty eyes brightened, wonderfully. "What other case is this of which you speak?"

"One in which the knife and revolver will have to take the place of the cunning and craft of the detective, I fear," Deadwood Dick replied, grimly. "I just got news, at Turkey Canyon, this morning, to look out for myself. Some rascal thirsting for notoriety, has hitched onto my title, and under the name of Deadwood Dick, is committing numerous depredations, of a criminal character, thereby imperiling my own safety."

"Oh! Dick! What will become of you? The people will think it is you, instead of the double of yours, and your safety will be gone."

"Perhaps, yes. But, when they catch the Old Original napping, it will be time to fear. This Double, as you have appropriately termed him, is the very man I must seek, and induce to relinquish the use of my title. I will hunt him down as I would a bear, and slay him if he refuses to exonerate me from all blame. No doubt there will be need for me to lie low, as I am pretty generally known as Deadwood Dick, and an effort may be made to take me. You have nothing to fear, however, as no one will disturb you, and you need not fear but what I can take care of myself. You are not afraid to remain here, alone, for a few days, are you?"

"No, Dick—not if it is necessary that I should do so. Old Daggers will stay with me, and I shall not be afraid."

"True, Daggers is a faithful, noble dog, and worth his weight in gold. Where is the old fellow?" and putting his fingers to his lips, Deadwood Dick gave vent to a shrill whistle.

A moment later a great shaggy mastiff of unusual size came bounding into the room. At sight of Deadwood Dick he gave a joyful bark, and rising upon his hind feet he walked forward, and placed his front paws affectionately about the ex-chief's neck, and rubbed his nose against his master's head.

It was an act of almost human affection, and tears sprang into Dick's eyes, as he patted the noble animal softly.

"Noble fellow!" he murmured, "you are indeed a true friend. With two such loving pets as you and Edith any man might well be happy. But I must not tarry longer. I must away to hunt down my Double. Be he a giant or a devil, he must drop my name, and repair the injury he is doing me—or die!"

"Bravo! husband; your words I enthusiastically echo. As Deadwood Dick you are a free man, and therefore let no one stain your name again."

"Nor will I. Here, Daggers, my boy; do you see your mistress yonder?"

The sagacious mastiff wagged his tail in assent.

"Well, now, I am going away, to be gone some time. What will you do when I am away, old fellow?"

Leaving Dick's side, the dog went over to where Edith was standing, and seated himself upon his haunches in front of her, showing his long pearly teeth, and uttering a deep growl as he did so.

Deadwood Dick rose with a smile.

"No need for me to remain longer, Edith, dear, when you have so brave a defender. Take care of yourself, now, and if you see any one approaching the cabin, close and bar the door. A kiss, pet, and then I am off to trail my Double."

Edith vouchsafed the token of affection cheerfully, and then after holding her for a moment in his arms, Deadwood Dick left the cabin. His horse was waiting him at the door, and he vaulted into the saddle with the same ease as when, a few years before, he had held full sway as Prince of the Deadwood Trail.

"By-by, darling!" he cried, waving his hand; "do not fear for me, nor for yourself, for I do not think any one will seek to disturb you."

"I hope not. By-by!" Edith returned, and then he galloped away across the glade, and was soon lost to view in the woods below.

"Poor Dick," the little wife murmured. "Will his life ever be free from peril? It would seem not. Hardly does he cast aside one obstruction or danger, before another menaces him. But, brave as the bravest, he battles on. Noble Dick. I love him more and more every day!"

"And cast your affection upon a worthless, roving vagabond," a cool voice exclaimed, and a man stepped from around one corner of the cabin with a low laugh.

Edith stepped back with a little cry of alarm, for she recognized the sinister face as that belonging to one of the most notorious ruffians in the region—and that man Chris Carleton—the lieutenant of Deadwood Dick's Double.

CHAPTER III.

THE FIRST BLOW.

BRIGHT and early in the morning of the day succeeding their arrival at Cat City, the colonists were up, and to work, with a will.

The ring of the ax and the echo of the hammer, together with the rum-zum of the saw and the shouts of stentorian voices, were heard in the valley. Men were hurrying to and fro; others were felling the great pines; others still were dragging them forth from the forest, with the aid of horses.

Everywhere were bustle and activity, and signs that civilization had struck Cat City and Gorgon Gulch.

Before noon the unmistakable shape and formation of a stanch log fortress began to loom up, not over a score of rods distant from the Casino, and by early sunset, through the united efforts of the plucky colonists, a two-story structure, sixty by a hundred feet, with a thatched and slab roof, stood frowning down upon the stage trail, ready for occupancy. To be sure there was no floor in it, and but a rude chimney, and the cracks and crevices had not been artistically plastered; but for all these deficiencies it offered a protective shelter to the colonists. And they proceeded to take possession of it forthwith.

The wagons were unpacked of the effects that had been brought along—each containing a few pieces of furniture, bedding, and housekeeping essentials—and said effects were moved into the fort, to be distributed around by busy feminine hands, while men corralled the horses in the rear of the fort, and secured the horses for the night in one end of the long structure, which had been divided off for their accommodation.

When all was arranged to general satisfaction, the colonists gathered before the door of their fort, and sent up three loud long cheers that awoke a thousand startled echoes throughout the valley.

"Hurrah!" Alf Montague cried, enthusiastically. "Send along your Deadwood Dick, now, if he wants to fight. We'll guarantee to give him all he wants, too. By the way, boys, what are we going to name our fort? A name she must have, or we shall not be lucky. What shall it be?"

"Name her Fort Ethel," Fred St. Celton said, "in honor of our gallant leader's daughter."

"Ay! ay! that's the talk—Fort Ethel it is," the colonists agreed, with one exception, and he the dark-faced fellow who had joined the colony in Kansas—Lew Lyons.

"I don't see it!" he grunted. "Thet ain't a high-soundin' title enough for a fort. Give et sum big name, like Fort Fortune or Firebrand."

"See here," Royce Elliott cried, "what do you mean? Do you cast a slur at my sister, you pilgrim? If that's your game, I'll break every bone in your body."

It had been observable that Lyons had been paying considerable attention to Ethel in the last few days, and having become unpleasantly familiar, she had twice repulsed him, since

when he had been moody and silent—a black shadow, as it were, in the cheerful party.

Royce Elliott, ever watchful, had noted the state of affairs, and had kept an eye upon the man, Lyons, resolved to "thrash" him, should he overstep his bounds.

Lyons flushed now at the words of the other, a gleam of hatred coming into his eyes.

"You can name your cussed fort what you please, for all I care," he growled, turning away.

"Fort Ethel it shall be, then," Alf Montague cried, "in honor of the captain's daughter. By the way, boys, I do not like the looks of that Lew Lyons. It appears to me he's just one of the kind of fellows who would stab you when your back is turned."

"Exactly my opinion," Charley St. Celton agreed. "He has got 'snake' written in his eyes plain as the nose on old Bill Myers's face."

This created a general laugh, for the nose of the Casino's illiterate host had been the butt of many jokes since the arrival of the colonists.

"I dare say that Lyons is no prime favorite with any of us," Judge Elliott said, gravely, "but it isn't advisable for us to incur his enmity. I'd rather have the love than the hatred of such a man as he, any time. He might be able to do us considerable harm."

"Papa is right!" Ethel cried, poking her roguish face out of the door. "Don't make any more enemies than possible, for we shall have enough as it is."

As the sun went down there was a perceptibly anxious expression upon the faces of the colonists, and many glances were turned toward the surrounding mountain-tops.

They were looking for, and expected to see, the fires that Deadwood Dick had promised should appear.

Nor were they disappointed.

About nine o'clock in the evening, fires appeared, one by one, upon the neighboring cliffs and peaks, and burned brightly.

From the door of the fort the little band of colonists watched them, with the dawning realization that they were the signals for the beginning of a bitter struggle for the possession of the little gulch valley.

Old Bill Myers and Sing Song came over from the Casino, and stood watching the illumination grimly, as they smoked their clay pipes.

"I reckon thet means bizness, Jedge," Myers observed, with a strange chuckle. "Them ar's Deadwood Dick's last warnin's fer ye ter git up and git."

"They will avail nothing," Judge Elliott replied. "We will fight for the possession of this valley as long as we draw the breath of life."

"You bet we will," Alf Montague assented, decidedly. "We'll hold the fort as long as we've hands left to fight with."

The fires soon burned down, and were not rekindled.

At Judge Elliott's suggestion two of the St. Celtons were detailed for guard, to keep watch in the neighborhood of the cabin during the night.

Then the others of the party turned in.

Morning dawned, without any important event transpiring. Nothing of the enemy had been seen by the St. Celton boys, and the light of day revealed no suspicious movement in the valley.

"Perhaps we shall not have much trouble, after all!" Judge Elliott said, as he dropped in at the Casino for a cigar. "The note and the fires may have been ventured to scare us away."

"Mebbe, and mebbe not," old Bill replied, gruffly. "I opine ye'll heer from Deadwood Dick yet."

Judge Elliott was not so sure of this. He believed that the rival claimant would hardly dare attempt an open attack, when he saw how strongly the colonists had rooted themselves by building the fort.

After breakfast, Royce and Montague shouldered their rifles, and set off to explore the wooded portions of the gulch, where the farming tracts of the colony were to be located.

They soon became separated, however, and when, at noon, Montague returned to the fort, he found that Royce Elliott had not yet arrived.

No particular attention was paid to this fact, until young Hanson went for a bucket of water, to the spring in the woods.

He soon came running back to the fort, then, with the announcement that Royce Elliott was lying insensible in the woods, near the spring.

A half-dozen of the colonists, headed by Judge Elliott and Alf Montague, instantly set

out for the spot, and, on arriving there, found young Hanson's report confirmed.

Royce was lying stretched out upon the ground, insensible, not a dozen feet from the spring. His face and body appeared to be bloated, and a hasty examination resulted in the discovery that he was dead!

He was taken up and carried to the fort, and a more careful examination was made of his person. No wound or bruise of any kind could be found upon his body, yet he was dead beyond all peradventure, there being no warmth in the body or beating of the heart.

In some inexplicable manner he had been stricken down in his prime.

Judge Elliott and Ethel were nearly distracted over their sad loss, and the rest of the colonists shared with them their grief.

Royce had been a prime favorite with all, and his sudden death was a shock not easily to be put aside.

Alf Montague and Lyons were the coolest men of the lot.

Montague was deeply grieved, but his was the grief that found expression in grave silence.

Lyons did not appear to be in the least affected, but sat in a retired corner and cleaned his rifle, while the others were weeping over the cold remains.

Old Bill Myers and his celestial companion came over from the Casino and viewed the corpse.

"Ye can set et down as ther furst blow o' thet cuss, Deadwood Dick," he said, to Montague, in an undertone. "Ken ye find how he was tuk off?"

"No. There is no signs of wounds or violence to be found upon his person."

"Mighty queer about thet. Found him cluss to the spring, did ye?"

"Yes—not a dozen feet from it."

"Have any of ye drunk water frum it since ye found him?"

"No."

"Then don't ye, jest yet. Mebbe thet ar' water has been pizened."

"Poisoned?" Montague gasped.

"Yas, pizened. I've heerd o' sech things bein' done afore now, an' I reckon Deadwood Dick ain't purtikler how he gits rid o' ye."

"By Heaven! perhaps you are right. This thing must be investigated before there are any more victims."

The young colonist quickly communicated the suspicion of old Bill Myers to the others, who were of course surprised, and yet saw a likelihood in the suggestion.

Young Hanson was immediately sent for some of the water of the spring, in order that it might be analyzed. Fred St. Celton was a chemist, and declared that he could soon tell whether the water had been poisoned or not.

In the meantime, while Montague and Tom St. Celton were removing the body of poor Royce to a bed, a paper dropped from his pocket, which was the key to the mystery.

Upon it, in letters of blood, were written the words:

"Poison!—my First Blow—tremble for the second!
DEADWOOD DICK!"

That was all, but it explained the cause of Royce's death, in accordance with Myers's suspicion.

We must needs return to the day before, when we left Edith, the wife of the original Deadwood Dick, confronted by the ruffian, Chris Carleton.

She was not frightened—only startled by his sudden appearance.

"What do you mean by this intrusion, sir?" she demanded, bravely, for although she knew him by name, she could form no idea of what errand could have brought him hence.

"What do I mean?" Carleton demanded, pausing and thrusting his hands in his breeches pockets, with a leer upon his evil visage. "Well, now, if ye really want to know, I've cum down to talk bizness to ye while Deadwood Dick's away. Ye see, I've had several glimpses of ye o' late, when I've been prowl'n' around, and I've gone dead sot on ye, fer a fact. So I come down here, ter day, ter get ye ter onhitch from Dick, as it war, an' hitch onto me."

"Sir! do you mean to insult me?" Edith cried, flushing angrily. "Begone, sir, or I will yell for my husband. It is not too late to make him hear!"

"Ye can yell as much as ye please," Carleton assured, grimly. "I don't care a cussed continental about yer lovey-dovey Dicky, you bet. Yure ther stool-pigeon I'm after, an' I'll make et plain ter ye thet I'm all fair an' squar'. I don't mean ter insult ye, but purpose ter hev

ye shake Dickey, fer myself. I'm a good sort o' pilgrim, an' hev tuk a notion thet ye'd make a fine ornament ter my shanty. Tharfore, when ye're ready, we'll go over an' get married, at Blind-Man's mine."

"No! we will not!" Edith declared. "You've entirely miscalculated, if it was your plan to come here and frighten me, for I'm not a bit scared."

"Oh! you ain't, eh?" Carleton grunted, admiringly. "Well, ye're a spunky little piece, an' all the more valuable for it. Cum! git on yer togs, an' prepare to go along with me."

"Don't stand there waiting until I do," Edith returned, coolly. "And by the way, if you value your anatomy very highly, I should advise you to pull out, lively, before I set my dog on you."

"Is he savage?"

"You probably will find out, if you don't take leg-bail, for security. Daggers, do you see that ruffian? How would you like to chaw him?"

The dog wagged its tail appreciatively, and uttered a low growl.

"You see—he is willing to make a meal of you," Edith continued, "and unless you are out of sight inside of five minutes, I'll set him onto you."

"Fer true?"

"Stay and see!"

"Cuss ye. I cum prepared ter take ye along wif me, an' I ain't a-goin' ter give up. I'll shoot ther dog."

"Then, I'll shoot you, while you are shooting the dog."

The ruffian swore, frightfully. He saw that there was no show for him, except to ignominiously retreat.

"Never mind! ye hold ther trump card, now, but I'll beat it, yet," he growled, as he began to back off, for he evidently had no relish for the dog. "I'll cum back, sum other time, and maybe when ye ain't expectin' me. Fer I've sworn ter possess ye, and I ain't a-goin' back on my word!"

He then turned and strode rapidly away, swearing at every step.

Edith re-entered her cabin home, and closed the door, satisfied with having baffled the ruffian's evil plot.

CHAPTER IV.

THE GHOST OF ROYCE ELLIOTT.

FROM bitter grief, the feelings of the colonists turned to sternest indignation. And why should they not?

A terrible blow had been struck them, through one of their number, and that blow from the hand of a foresworn enemy! Poison, too, had been used—that most silent and deadly agency of the coward assassin. Had Royce Elliott fallen by the shot of a rifle or the stab of a sword, his friends would not have been nearly so horrified, as they would then have believed he died defending himself.

The spring water was soon brought, and Fred St. Celton made an examination of it, as well as he was able with what few "tools" he had brought with him from the East.

"The spring has been liberally 'doped with arsenic," he said, after awhile, "and it is certain death to him who drinks from it."

"Then, take warning, and drink none of the water," Montague warned.

"No! don't tech ther pesky stuff," Bill Myers advised. "Ef ye git thirsty, jest waltz over to the Casino, an' thar ye ken git three fingers o' paralysis fer a dollar—ther best article twixt heer an' Washington; ain't et, Singer?"

"Muhcee gooddee fire-water," Sing Song agreed, smacking his lips.

"Something must be done to avenge poor Royce's death," Alf Montague said. "Are we going to stand idle, and let an assassin pick off our best men? By no means! We must strike back to the death!"

"Truly spoken," St. Celton responded with an approving nod. "We must fight this Deadwood Dick with red-hot irons. We must meet ingenuity with ingenuity, craft with craft, and brute force with brute force. Otherwise, we shall be defeated, in spite of ourselves. But all this action must be postponed until poor Royce is buried. And that will needs be soon, for you will observe that his body is bloating even after death, and mortification will soon set in."

Montague gently apprised the Judge and Ethel of this fact, and it was decided to bury the remains at sunset, that same day, as when night once more set in it was apprehended that Deadwood Dick would fill the valley with his merciless agents, and there might be no chance to give

the murdered boy a decent interment for several days.

A pretty spot was selected in the edge of the wood, within sight and gunshot of the fort, and during the afternoon the colonists dug a grave there, and a coffin was fashioned by chiseling out a trough-shaped receptacle from the body of a thick pine log. The body was then placed in this, a short but eloquent funeral service was read by Mr. St. Celton, after which the mourners took a farewell look at the corpse, and the rude coffin was closed, by nailing a slab over the aperture, upon which the loving hands of Alf Montague had chiseled the word:

"ROYCE."

Just as the sun was dipping its fiery crest over the western mountain ridge, the remains were borne from the fort to the newly dug grave, and after an earnest prayer, were covered forever from view, amid the sobs of the grief-stricken father and sister, and the surrounding colonists.

It was a discouraging blow to their hopes and ambition, but the strong determination of Alf Montague re-nerved them all, and instilled into their hearts the will to stay and fight it out to the bitter end.

Guards were posted for the night, and every preparation made to repel an attack should one come.

Even Old Bill Myers appeared uneasy, and closed his cabin early in the evening and put out the lights.

Tom St. Celton and Will Hanson went on guard duty, in the close vicinity of the cabin. Both were brave, stalwart sons of old Virginia, aged twenty-two and three, respectively—boys who loved adventure, and had never known what it was to fear.

The night was very dark, although the great dome of the heavens glittered like a coronet of priceless diamonds. The blackness seemed to hover close to the earth, and it was impossible to see any distance before one's face.

About midnight, while pacing to and fro in front of the fort, Tom St. Celton chanced to glance in the direction of Royce Elliott's grave, down by the edge of the forest, and to his unbounded surprise and horror there saw a sight that sent a chill of dread and terror down the spine of his back.

Beneath the tree where Royce's grave had been located, stood a horseman, in the blackness of the moonless night.

Not an ordinary horseman, or St. Celton could never have seen it, from the fort, on account of the gloom—not an ordinary horseman, but a spectacle so frightful as to have unmoved the strongest disbeliever in the supernatural. A white horse, and a white clad rider, surrounded by a strange, weird halo of whitish light, stood there beneath the shelter of the tree, silent and ghostlike, and the face of the spectral rider, as plainly perceptible to St. Celton was exactly like the deathly face of Royce Elliott, the eyes being closed, and the lips slightly parted, the same as when they had laid him away in his rude coffin.

Tom St. Celton uttered a horrified exclamation, and hastily aroused young Hanson, who was dozing in the doorway of the fort.

"For God's sake, look there!" the young colonist gasped, pointing toward the wood.

Hanson sleepily arose, rubbed his eyes, and then stared hard at the ghostly spectacle, a nervous tremor perceptibly shaking his form.

"In the name of Heaven, what is it?" he articulated, faintly.

"It's Royce Elliott's ghost!" Tom St. Celton replied, huskily. "Don't you see? It's his face, just as it was, when we put him in the coffin."

"My God! you are right, Tom. He looks as natural as in life. What shall we do?"

"I hardly know. Go in, softly, and arouse Fred and Montague. Don't awake any of the others."

Hanson obeyed, with alacrity, and soon reappeared followed by the young chemist, and Montague.

They both turned pale, and trembled violently, as they beheld the spectacle in the edge of the woods.

"This is too horrible to be true!" Fred St. Celton gasped, hoarsely. "That is certainly Royce Elliott, either in life or death, and I am well satisfied that he was as dead as ever a mortal could be when we buried him. Montague, for Heaven's sake, tell me what you think?"

"I don't know what to think," the young man replied. "That is certainly Royce's face, or we are all in a horrible nightmare. Hand me my rifle, some of you. I'll soon test the matter, beyond doubt."

"No! no! you must not shoot. You would arouse those within the fort. It would not do

to let Ethel or the Judge see this sight, nearly distracted, as they are. We must keep the matter a secret between ourselves."

"You are right; I did not think of them," Montague assented. "Ah! look yonder!"

They had been gazing toward the fort an instant while speaking, and on looking again in the direction of the forest, they perceived, to their astonishment, that their specter had vanished!

Gone, and left no trace behind to tell of its sudden flight.

"Thank Heaven! it is gone!" Montague said, with a sigh of relief. "Boys, I'd rather have given one year of my life, than to have seen that—that—"

"Ghost!" Fred St. Celton finished, "for it was nothing else. With Royce Elliott dead, and in his grave, how could it be aught else—that which we have seen?"

"Don't ask me—I do not know," Montague replied, rubbing his hand across his forehead. "This has been a greater shock to me than it may seem to you. I am all unnerved, and as weak as a child."

"It has been a shock to all of us, I guess," St. Celton replied, "and I propose, since the specter is gone, that you all go into the fort and lie down awhile. I will do guard duty until morning."

And accordingly it was so arranged.

Fred St. Celton paced to and fro about the little fort until day dawned, but saw nothing more of Royce Elliott's ghost.

The colonists were astir bright and early, and as there had been no sign of hostility on the part of the rival claimants of the gulch during the night, their hopes began to grow that the struggle was over.

Leaving four of the party to guard the fort and the women, the other nine started forth, with chains and surveying compass, to lay out the respective farms for the four families—the Elliotts, the Hansons, the Warwicks and St. Celtons.

The valley or basin was to be divided into four equal sections, and then apportioned as could be agreed upon.

A measurement was made both ways across the tract, and the center thereby determined upon, from which stakes were driven, or trees marked to the mountainous limits of the gulch.

The divisions were so made that the stage trail crossed two of the tracts, while the remaining two were some distance from it.

To arrive at a fair distribution of the lands, straws were drawn by Judge Elliott, James Warwick, Henry Hanson, and Edwin St. Celton.

The result awarded Elliott and St. Celton the western tracts, through which the stage trail ran, the little fort coming upon Elliott's land and Myers's tavern upon St. Celton's part.

The allotments seemed to be satisfactory, inasmuch as all hands were to use the fort so long as there was any danger of hostilities from Deadwood Dick.

The Warwicks and Hansons set to work in getting out timber for cabins and out buildings, but Judge Elliott made no move in this direction on account of Royce's death, and the St. Celtons did not appear decided what to do.

During the day Fred St. Celton and Montague paid a visit, on the sly, to Royce's grave, and closely examined the ground in the neighborhood.

Horses' tracks were visible, near the grave, and the indications went to show that they had come from, and departed through woods.

"If I were a trailer, I would attempt to follow that trail," Montague said, "but as I am not I guess we shall have to wait until there are more of these visitations."

"Yes; but betwixt you and me, Alf, we must lay aside all cowardly and superstitious fear, and tackle the thing, whether it be a ghost, or devil."

"I agree with you there. If we capture this ghost, it will either be to get scared worse than ever, or to make a surprising discovery. But candidly, although no general believer in ghostly folderol, I believe it was the disembodied spirit of Royce Elliott which we saw last night."

"There seems to be little doubt of it, since he was most certainly dead when we placed him in the rough coffin."

The two young men walked slowly back toward Fort Ethel, each gloomy and silent over the mystery that now enshrouded the valley.

About noon the stage arrived from Leadville, on its way north, and three passengers disembarked from it, and stopped off at the Casino.

They were roughly dressed but honest-looking fellows, who claimed to be hunters, but as

each carried a pick, pan and shovel, it was easy to see that they were also in the habit of combining the profitable pursuit of prospecting with the pleasure of hunting.

"Let them go," Judge Elliott said, in answer to a question from Montague. "If they discover gold in this valley, they cannot hold the claim."

And so it was decided to put no restrictions upon the movements of the new-comers, who gave their names as Jones, Allen and Gray.

They lounged around the tavern during the day and drank freely, and spent their money with a free hand. Toward night Jones, a brawny six-footer, walked over to the fort and offered the judge a hundred dollars for a building lot alongside the stage road, but was refused, at which he did not appear very much pleased, and stalked away, swearing mildly.

That night they filled up chock full of Myers's "liquid paralysis," and howled around the tavern in high revelry until sunrise, when they made their appearance, armed with their weapons and mining implements.

"What do you propose doing, gentlemen?" St. Celton, the elder, asked, as they were about to set off down into the heart of the basin.

"Oh, we're goin' ter dig fer grubs ter go a-fishin' wi'!" Jones replied, with a leer, at which the others laughed, significantly.

After they had gone, St. Celton, Sr., shook his head, doubtingly.

"I don't quite like this business," he said. "It looks to me as if this was a little game of Deadwood Dick's origin, to get his men into the valley without our knowledge, so that he will be better prepared to fight us."

"True! It does savor that way," Judge Elliott assented, "and when those fellows return, we'd best order them away."

"But what if they refuse to go?"

"Then, we'll take charge of them."

Nothing more was seen of them, however, until noon, when the man, Allen, came from the woods and departed on the northward stage.

An hour later, when the southward stage passed, the giant, Jones, was seen to emerge from the woods and board it.

That left in the valley, out of the three, only Gray, a sharp-eyed little Missourian.

The colonists had watched the movements not a little anxiously, for they felt that something was brooding of importance.

"Look out for an invasion, now," Alf Montague warned, as he saw Jones depart. "Those fellows have discovered gold in this valley, mark my word for it, and they mean to bring back a gang of roughs with them big enough in numbers to take and hold the land!"

"We shall see about that," Fred St. Celton said, a little fiercely. "Perhaps it is just possible that two can play at that game!"

CHAPTER V.

A VILLAINOUS PROPOSAL.

"WHAT do you mean?" Montague asked.

"I will show you," Fred replied, tightening up his belt. "Fetch me a horse, some one, and I will ride to the nearest town, and bring back a gang of miners, who will fight for us!"

"That won't do," Judge Elliott replied—"not if we can avoid it. We would simply have to give up our lands in either case. There is, I believe, a better plan for us to pursue. Myers has been telling me that this Deadwood Dick lives upon the stage trail, about ten miles from here, and that he has a pretty wife, of whom he is passionately fond. Now, if we could capture her, and bring her here, as a prisoner, I fancy that we could manage Mr. Deadwood Dick, just about as we pleased."

"It's a capital idea," Montague assented, eagerly. "Deadwood Dick's wife once in our power, we will have him boiled down fine—that is, if he cares anything for her."

"Myers avers that he does care very much for her, and rather than that she should suffer, he would, undoubtedly, suspend hostilities."

"But, surely, papa, you would not think of harming her?" Ethel interrogated, anxiously.

"That depends somewhat upon circumstances," the Virginian replied, a little sternly. "If the road-agent devil persist in annoying us, and killing our men, either her life or his must pay the forfeit."

"Who will volunteer to go and fetch the woman?" Montague asked. "The sooner we can get her here, the better, as, I imagine tomorrow will see a change in the situation of affairs."

"I will go, for one," Fred St. Celton responded. "I only want a couple of others to accompany me, as three can handle a woman better than a dozen."

Young Hanson and Warwick finally volunteered to go, and it was decided to start at once, as night was drawing on, and it would be safer traveling. The swiftest horses were accordingly selected, and their feet muffled; then vaulting into the saddles, the three colonists were off.

After they had gone, the remaining colonists made preparations for another night's watch.

About sunset Chris Carleton rode into the valley and dismounted before the Casino, with as much coolness as though he were not an outlaw and a member of Deadwood Dick's band.

Entering the tavern, he drank deeply of Myers's whisky, when he left the place, and mounting, rode over to the fort.

Judge Elliott and Montague were standing in the doorway as he rode up watching his movements, for they were resolved, if necessary, to protect the interests of the colony by shooting him.

"Evenin'," Carleton grunted, as he yanked his horse to a standstill. "Bin a fine day, ain't it?"

"The day has been pleasant," the Judge replied stiffly, resolved to keep his temper and wrath in abeyance as long as possible, despite the great loss he had suffered.

"How d'ye make it jibe?" the outlaw demanded, coolly twisting the ends of his mustache. "Gettin' most red-hot ter vamoose?"

"By no means, sir. If you came here to test us, you can go away knowing that we will fight for this valley as long as we have a grain of powder, an ounce of lead, or a drop of life-blood."

"Waal, that ain't percisely what I cum fer," the ruffian replied, with a peculiar grin. "Ye see et kinder 'peared ter me like as ef ye hed ther best side o' this question fer a pistolic debate, an' I cum down ter see ef we couldn't strike a bargain."

"I do not know about that, sir. There is none of us that owes you any good will, and consequently we should advise you to keep away."

"Well, ef ye'd rather hev my enmity then my friendship, jest say so, an' ye ken have dead loads of et."

"We crave for neither, sir—simply for peaceful possession," the Judge said, decidedly.

"Neow, that's ther very thing wot I want, too," Carleton assured, "I tell ye what, ef ye don't make terms wi' me, ye're losin' yer last chance o' winnin' the game. Before sunset tomorrow, thar'll be over a hundred men, wimmen an' children here in this valley who'd obey Deadwood Dick's very beck an' nod. Then ye ken't say yer soul's yer own. Yer only hope hops inter view jest now. Ef ye make terms, I hev ther power ter check the stampede into this valley. Ef not, thar'll be lively times heer, an' ther basin will fill wi' spilt blood!"

"Do your worst, we fear not," Montague cried. "Carry the word back to your chief that we defy him."

"But, hold! First let us hear this fellow's terms," Judge Elliott said. "Perhaps they will be such that we may accept them."

"Now ye tork bizness," Carleton averred. "I ain't no swine, an' I allow I know w'at's er fair shake as well as ther next one. An' so ef ye'll dig ther wax outer yer ears, an' listen, I'll tell ye wot I'll do. Et depends muchly on me whether ye hold this valley or not. I kin stop ther influx o' Deadwood Dick's men, or I kin increase 'em, a hundred fold. My terms are that you will each give me ten acres off o' yer farms, where ther corner in the middle o' this basin—give 'em to me as my own, rightful property, an' thet you, Jedge, shall give me over thet darter o' yours, ter fill my shanty as Mrs. Chris Carleton!"

"By heaven! I'd see you at the further end of the earth, first, so far as giving you my child," Judge Elliott cried, sternly, "and I am equally sure that none of us would part with any of our lands for the sake of securing the good will of a man of your type."

"Then ye refuse ter cum ter terms?"

"Absolutely!"

"Cuss ye! ye've sealed yer fate then. I will not hinder the vengeful work o' Deadwood Dick, an' he'll massacre every mother's son o' ye. An', as fer thet pretty female posey thar wi'n the fort, I'll pursess her yet, an' don't ye fergit it, ef I hev ter wade in blood over my boot-tops ter git her. I've sworn ter et, an' ye'll find me true ter my oath."

Then shaking his fist at them, the ruffian wheeled his horse and spurred away.

With an exclamation Montague whipped out his revolver, but the Judge laid his hand upon his arm, reprovingly.

"Stay! do not shoot him, and hasten the trouble upon us. We are ill prepared for battle

even with our full force, and three are absent. Wait! There will be fighting enough to do, hereafter."

"You are right," the young man replied. "Let the rascal go. A just fate will soon overtake him."

And so Chris Carleton was permitted to ride out of the basin gulch unmolested, which was a kindness he did not deserve, to say the least.

No other incident of importance occurred that day, and night settled her somber shadows once more over the land.

Two of the younger St. Celton boys volunteered to do guard duty, and accordingly were permitted to do so, while the remainder of the colonists turned in for the night, as the absentees were not expected before morning, or later.

It was just early dawn when Montague was aroused by the howl of a coyote near the door of the fort—a mournful, snarling sound that chilled him.

He partly arose, and touched the senior Warwick, who lay near by.

"Did you hear that?" he demanded, in a low tone.

"Yes," was the reply. "It was some wild animal."

"Exactly, and its presence here has a significance. There is trouble, and you and I must make an investigation. 'Sh! don't make a noise!"

Both men softly arose, and stole toward the door.

Montague lifted the bars, and flung it open, at the same time drawing his revolvers.

The next instant both he and Warwick leaped back with startled yells.

The sight that stared them in the face was too horrible for belief at first sight.

Just in front of the door, not more than fifty feet distant, two poles had been planted into the ground, leaving about ten feet above-ground.

Upon the top of these poles were stuck the bodiless heads of George and Charlie St. Celton!

The heads had been cleanly severed from the body, and thus perched as a ghastly warning to the colonists, for upon the forehead of each was slashed the letters "D. D."—signifying "Deadwood Dick!"

The bodies of the unfortunate young men were nowhere in sight.

The startled yells of Montague and Warwick speedily brought the rest of the colonists from their slumber to gaze transfixed with horror upon the awful sight.

How can we picture the terrible grief of those colonists, especially the father, mother, sister and brothers of the murdered youths?

Indeed, it would be a task not pleasant to undertake, and therefore we pass over the scene of bitter mourning and lamentation that followed, as briefly as possible.

The two ghastly heads were taken down and buried in a box near the fort, being the second solemn occasion of the kind since the colonists arrived in Cat City valley.

The sun rose bright on this day, but the pioneers could see no signs of hostile presence in the valley, although by Judge Elliott's orders, no one had ventured beyond gun-shot range from the fort.

Unanimously chosen as commander of the little fort, the Judge determined to execute his duties to the best of his ability.

About noon the stages arrived from the North and South, but neither unloaded any human freight in front of the Casino.

What was the meaning?

Had the plan of invading the Gulch been abandoned, or had Deadwood Dick stolen in and taken possession during the night?

It was a puzzling problem to solve, but Alf Montague decided to tackle it.

It was necessary to make a scout to ascertain the "lay of the land," and arming himself well, he decided to go alone.

Accordingly, early in the afternoon he set forth, promising to come back as soon as possible, for Fred St. Celton and his party had not yet returned, which left but seven males at the fort.

Taking the road going south, he followed it until he had entirely left the valley. This was a maneuver to outwit any of the enemy (if there were any such in the basin) and make them believe he was going to Leadville.

He then dropped upon all-fours and crept carefully back to the edge of the basin, where he paused.

A skirting fringe of bushes ran from the mouth, around the eastern side of the mountain's base, to the northern continuation of the gulch.

He finally, by crawling upon his stomach, gained the protection of this cover, which was precisely what he most desired; he then crept on, upon his hands and knees, until he gained a position among the foothills, directly opposite the fort, across the basin.

Here he paused once more, to make observations.

Without being seen he could see down into the valley, but could see no signs of life. All was silent except the trees that were occasionally fanned by the breeze.

"By Jove! I believe there are persons in the depths of that forest yet, and I'm going to satisfy myself on the point, if I have to run the risk of my life."

He accordingly crept down from the footings toward the heart of the valley, which was thickly timbered with pine and spruce evergreens.

With the stealth and caution of a skilled trapper he moved on until he had arrived near the center of the forest, where he paused.

Before him lay a little glade that he had never seen before, across which ran a little stream of glistening water.

Near this was built a rude hut of limbs and brush, thatched over with moss, leaves and grasses—a hastily arranged affair at the best.

Montague paused in the edge of the glade as motionless as a phantom—paused and gazed and listened, to ascertain if any person was within the rude hut.

But his patience finally became exhausted, for no signs of human life was he able to discover.

The grim pines sighed and sighed, as they were wont to do, in the embrace of the breeze; the little creek babbled noisily over its gravelly bed; the insects of the forest droned and chirped as usual and the birds sang musically, but not a sound or sight of human presence greeted the watcher.

"I've half a notion to go forward and take a peep into that shebang, anyhow," he muttered. "I shan't more than get salivated, as they say, for my cheek, and the satisfaction of one's curiosity ought to compensate for the pangs of one's bullet. I guess I'm mistaken about there being invaders in the gulch, if this hut has any significance. It was probably built by that Gray, Jones and Allen."

"Yer darned right thar, pardner," a cool voice exclaimed, and wheeling around Montague found the little Missourian, Gray, standing close behind with a pair of formidable six-shooters in his grasp, already cocked. "Yer darned right thar, old hoss, an' sence ye've cum down ter visit us, I opine I shall oblige yer ter accept my hospitality ontill ther rest o' ther gang arrives. My name's Gil Gray, an' I'm a thoroughbred. Drop yer weepens, or I'll puncturate ye!"

CHAPTER VI.

SLIPPERY SAL APPEARS.

MONTAGUE clearly saw that he had run himself into a fix, but did not propose to cry about it.

He was the coolest, always, when danger menaced, and the best prepared to cope with odds.

He perceived that the little Missourian had him "covered" by his weapons, and that resistance was, for the time being, utterly useless.

Still, he resolved to hold parley for awhile, in hopes, Micawberlike, that something would "turn up" to relieve him from his dilemma.

"You don't mean to take me a prisoner?" he demanded, as if in great surprise. "What have I done to you?"

"Waal, I opine thet ain't my say. Bob Jones he be my right bower, an' I act accordink to his instructions. He sed latch ont'er ye, ef ye poked yer nose down this way, an' you bet I mind like a angel."

"I perceive you do. But I don't see what your pardner can want of me."

"Oh! Ye'll find thet out when he comes along wi' ther Capt'in an' ther rest o' ther gang."

"Then you belong to Deadwood Dick's infernal crew, do you?" Montague demanded.

"It does me proud to announce that I do," Gray declared, with a chuckle.

"Then you're the precise galoot I'm anxious ter tackle!" a strange voice cried, and to the surprise of both, a new-comer stepped in upon the scene, and "covered" the Missourian with a cocked revolver fully as dangerous-looking as his own.

Not a man, mind you, but a woman, young and comely—a strange creature, attired in a semi-male hunting suit, consisting of fringed breeches, top boots, long hunting-shirt, and a jaunty straw hat upon her head.

In face she was handsome of feature, and fair of complexion, although it was easily perceptible that she had acquired and adopted the high feminine art of painting and powdering. Her eyes were dark and penetrating, and a great abundance of yellow hair was frizzed and puffed upon her head and forehead, and fell in waves upon her shoulders.

She was armed with weapons of the latest improved patterns—a rifle slung behind her back, a revolver and knife in her belt, and the revolver in her grasp.

In her left hand, she carried a small leather sachel.

Steadily did she level her weapon at the heart of the Missourian, and in a way that meant business.

"You jest drap them patent perforators o' yours, ef ye don't want me ter plug ye wi' a slug frum my krupp gun, heer!" she advised, coolly. "Thes hyar high-handed leetle game o' yours don't work wuth a Canadian copper; an' as I'm a Regulator an' Adjuster on my own hook, I opine ef ye don't mind right peart, I'll prepare ye fer a leetle hole in ther ground."

"Who the devil are you?" the Missourian growled, flinching before the magnetic deadly gaze of the strange girl—for she was little else, apparently—and allowing his weapons to drop from a level with Montague's heart. "You hain't got no bizness ter lip in, an' stick yer paw in my puddin'!"

"Mebbe not, but when I hain't got no liberty I allus manufacture a supply, ye see. Ef ye want my cog, et's Slippery Sal Slocum, an' don't ye fergit it. Ever heer o' me? I'm a hull circus, an' part o' a peraggerie when ye get me waked up, sure. Come! sling away them weepens, I say!"

"Mebbe I will, an' mebbe I won't," Gray snarled. "What do you intend to do with me?"

"Hang you, on course," Slippery Sal assured. "You'll lend a hand won't you, pilgrim?" turning to Montague.

"I don't know," the colonist replied, rather dubiously. "The art of hanging has never been one o' my accomplishments."

"Bah! thet don't make no difference. Ye ken't learn any younger, an' ef ye 're goin' ter squat around ther diggins, ye ken't put yer waste time ter better purpose than practicin' on sech ornery skunks as this. After ye git yer hand in, it's fun. Remember poor Royce Elliott and don't crawfish fer a few compunkshuns, nohow."

"Bet a burro ye won't hang me," the Missourian growled. "Listen! some o' ther boys are comin'!"

"Then, that settles your fate, you cussed ruffian!" Slippery Sal cried, with sudden grin, and the next instant her weapon twice spoke forth its fury.

Gray uttered an exclamation of pain and rage and dropped—not dead, but mortally wounded.

At the same time there were a dozen rifle reports, the sound of vindictive yells, and a volley of bullets whistled through the glade.

Montague uttered a faint groan. Slippery Sal looked, saw him fall, and knew that he was wounded.

The outlaw companions of the Missourian now burst into the valley, a score or more, with frightful yells and oaths.

Slippery Sal uttered a strange, wild, almost devilish laugh, and bounding forward in the face of the oncoming ruffians, seized Montague and raising him from the ground, across her shoulders, she sprung on, away into the deeper forest, with the fleetness of a fawn.

Uttering discordant yells of vengeance the outlaws dashed away in hot pursuit, but although strong and stout, and unincumbered, they were no match for this strange female Hercules.

An accustomed runner, evidently, was she, for she kept on with rapid bounds, despite her burden, the heft of which caused the roses to spring vividly into her fair cheeks.

Through the forest she went bounding and leaping like a hunted fox—over fallen trees, through briars and bushes, bravely bearing the wounded colonist out of danger.

At last she burst from the forest, and a few bounds brought her to the fort, the door of which was open to receive her with her burden.

Just as she entered the fort, the outlaws burst from the timber, but on seeing that she had escaped them, they beat a hasty retreat, out of sight.

"Oh! what has happened to Alf?" Ethel Elliott demanded, in distress, as Slippery Sal coolly unloaded Montague from her shoulder, and laid him upon a couch of straw. "Is he dead—killed? Oh! Alf! Alf!"

"No, he ain't dead, nor killed, I reckon," the eccentric girl replied, with a little laugh, "but I'll allow he'd a-got hashed-up purty lively by them toughs, ef et hedn't been for agal o' about my statter an' amiability. My name's Sal Slocum, leddies an' gentlemen, ef ye want'er know—Slippery Sal, fer short, an' I'm allus on my muscle, ready fer a skewrup. Heerd ye needed recruits, down heer, and thort I'd cum down an' show my hand. Got anything to ent?"

"Of course we have, and you shall have all you want of such as we have, because you saved Alf!" Ethel declared.

And the rest of the colonists warmly welcomed the odd stranger, who had risked her own life to save that of Montague, who was not seriously wounded—a bullet in either leg being his only disabling hurts.

Slippery Sal soon proved that she knew how to make herself at home, and that she was not a bit bashful. Moreover she was tonguey and witty, and her presence was the means of in a measure cheering the colonists out of the gloomy state they were gradually settling into.

Though bold and eccentric, her actions were not censurable, and she soon was respected and admired by all within the fort, but was equally a puzzle to them.

She could sing, or dance, or joke, upon an instant's warning, and yet, at times a sudden wave of thoughtfulness would seem to steal over her, and thus she would remain until the cloud lifted, a few minutes later.

Fred St. Celton's hand had not yet returned with the wife of Deadwood Dick, and considerable anxiety was felt lest they had been entrapped or ambushed by the outlaws, and either taken prisoners or massacred.

When asked her opinion about the matter, after an explanation had been made to her, Slippery Sal shook her head.

"Don't allow they've seed any trouble from ther gang, 'case they've bin hyar in the valley since last midnight, or at least a sheer o' 'em. What aire we goin' ter fetch Deadwood Dick's wife here for?"

"She is to be our prisener. We are going to use her to protect ourselves with. Either this Deadwood Dick must withdraw his claim from the valley and cease his hostilities, or we shall be compelled to hold his wife as a hostage."

"The plan won't work," Slippery Sal said. "When you deal with the genuine Deadwood Dick, you deal with a gentleman of honor, and a man who fears neither feller-man nor devil."

"One would infer that you do not believe our present enemy to be the genuine Deadwood Dick," the Judge said, in some surprise.

"Thet's about the size of et, yes. I've heerd tell on ther real Deadwood Dick, an' I'll allow he don't head a gang o' cutthroats, now. This feller who's claimin' the gulch ain't the genuine."

"I cannot believe that. Deadwood Dick has a hard reputation, and it is said, never lets human life stand in the way of his ambition."

Slippery Sal turned away.

"Mebbe not," she said.

Night drew on and began to close in over the gulch basin. With its approach camp-fires began to gleam here and there on the edge of the eastern forest.

Montague, supported by a pair of hastily-formed crutches, watched them from the door of the fort, in company with the Judge, and Ethel, and several others among whom Slippery Sal was prominent.

"I don't believe but what we'll see trouble to-night," the young colonist replied, in answer to an inquiry for his opinion. "The devils have got possession of the timber, and can worry us if they try."

"Yes, they've got ther dead wood on ye, but that ain't no reason why they shed lick, if ye play yer keeds sharp," was Sal's opinion.

"How do you mean?"

"Oh! I kent tel ye, jest yet, ye know, but take my word fer et, thar'll be a red-hot chances ag'in' them invaders by and by."

This was all that was said just then, for "General" Elliott, as Sal had christened him, gave orders for closing the fort.

It was decided not to post a guard upon the outside of the building, owing to the tragic fate of the two St. Celton boys.

Slippery Sal and Judge Elliott volunteered to keep a watch within the fort, and give the alarm should any suspicious sights or sounds be heard.

The Girl Sport, as she characterized herself, was a person of keen sense and judgment, despite her strangeness of word and manner, and gave little bits of advice, occasionally, in regard to different things, that showed that she

had had experience—that hers was an old head upon young shoulders.

The Judge took more than an usual interest in her, evidently, for he frequently drew her into conversation, and his eyes were upon her, when she was present.

But Slippery Sal failed to notice this, evidently, for she treated one and all alike, with the exception of Lew Lyons.

To him she seemed to take an instant aversion, which, however, was not singular as none of the colonists were particularly fond of him, or his society.

Lyons did not appear to care particularly, and if he meditated mischief, he was frustrated by being closely watched.

About midnight, when Judge Elliott had stepped without the fort for a moment, Slippery Sal crossed over to where Lyons was lying, and peered down sharply into his face. The man was evidently sound asleep, and the Girl Sport had opportunity to closely inspect his face without his knowing it.

"I thought I had seen him before, when I came here, but guess I'm mistaken," she mused, as she finally turned away and went back to her vigil.

At this instant Judge Elliott came rushing into the fort, in a state of great excitement.

"Wake up! wake up—all of you!" he cried, wildly—"wake up, for God's sake, and tell me that I am dreaming, or am I going mad! A ghost—Royce! Royce, my dead boy!"

One by one the colonists collected by the Judge's side, and followed the line of his pointed arm down into the basin, where the grave of Royce Elliott had been made.

There they saw what Montague, Hanson, and the St. Celtons had seen the night before—the ghastly horseman by the edge of the forest, surrounded by the mysterious halo of light.

Plainly perceptible to those at the fort, the face was an exact counterpart of what young Elliott's face had been in life, except that the eyes were now closed, and there was an unearthly pallor upon the features.

Transfixed with horror, the colonists gazed at the frightful spectacle in mute silence.

There was something so very terrible in the thought of Royce Elliott's coming back to haunt them, that they could but stand and gaze in speechless horror.

Montague and Slippery Sal were the coolest ones of the lot. Montague was not so greatly agitated as when he had seen it before, and as for the Girl Sport, she was perfectly cool, as she gazed keenly at the spectral apparition.

Lew Lyons was the first man to speak.

"Curse the thing!" he gasped, white with terror, as he reached for his rifle. "I'll drop that ghost, or waste my lead, one or the other!"

He raised his rifle to his shoulder and took aim, but Slippery Sal suddenly sprang forward and knocked the weapon out of range.

"Cheese it!" she said, authoritatively. "Don't you dare to fire, or ye don't want'er die!"

CHAPTER VII.

EDITH HARRIS.

BUSINESS was there in the words of Slippery Sal, and although it was in the mind of Lyons to disobey her, he hesitated, and flinched before the deadly gaze that came from her midnight orbs.

"What the hang's the difference to you, what I do?" he demanded, with a savage growl.

"A good bit," Sal replied, coolly. "Ye don't shute that speerit, not if I kin help it—for two reasons. First: I've got a partickler river-ance fer speerits an' ghosts; an' seckont—knowin' well ye couldn't tech yonder apparition, ye'd better keep yer fire, fer thar'll be fightin' ter do, afore daybreak. Them woods down thar ain't so dull an' gloomy fer nothing, bet yer dirty socks on that!"

"The girl is right," the senior St. Celton declared, approvingly. "Nothing can be gained by wasting powder on yonder thing, be it spirit, man or devil. My dear Elliot, what in the name of Heaven can it be? Do you think it is the ghost of your dead son?"

"Yes! yes!" the Judge groaned, huskily, "it is his ghost come back to haunt me. Oh! God, what have I ever done to merit this blow?"

"Do not take this matter to heart so, Judge," Montague said, hobbling forward upon his crutches. "If yonder specter is indeed a spirit from the other world, I am sure it does not come to haunt us for any particular sin, but is sent as a warning of danger, and also to watch for our welfare. I have seen the thing once before, together with young Hanson, and Tom and Fred St. Celton, but refrained from mentioning

the fact, lest it should give you undue anxiety and trouble."

"See! see!" Slippery Sal cried, pointing down into the basin, excitedly. "Montague's words are right. It comes as a warnin', darn my cats ef it don't. See! it holds aloft a banner."

They all looked, to find that it was even so.

The right arm of the specter had suddenly stretched out from the shoulder, and the hand grasped an illuminated banner, on which was inscribed in letters of fire, which shone brightly into the night, the following words:

"Look out! Danger! Be firm!"

That and nothing more.

Then, after a moment, the apparition suddenly began to fade from view, until it was quite lost from sight, although it did not seem to move from the one side where it had first appeared.

When it was gone there was a general sigh of relief among the colonists as they turned back into the fort. The Judge and Ethel had, in a measure, conquered their agitation, but were grave and silent, which showed that the sight of the specter had affected them more than was apparent.

There was no sleep in the little fort for the remainder of that night, nevertheless the ghost did not make its appearance.

Toward daybreak hoof-strokes were heard, and it was discovered that Fred St. Celton and his party were approaching the fort.

The door was thrown open as soon as they arrived, and they were heartily welcomed.

Mounted upon an extra horse was Edith, the pretty wife of Deadwood Dick, now looking pale and fatigued. Close beside her horse the big mastiff, Old Daggers, kept vigilant watch of his mistress, as much as to say:

"Look out! If you harm her, woe be unto you."

"Here we are!" Fred St. Celton cried, as he rode up, and slipped from the saddle. "We corraled the game, after a while, and induced her to come. And as tired and hungry as dogs are we."

A general dismount was made, and Edith was conducted into the cabin, closely followed by the dog.

"You want to look out for her," Fred St. Celton said. "She protests the cuss who claims the valley isn't her husband, the true Richard, and claims we are doing her a great injustice by bringing her here as a prisoner."

"And so I do!" Edith cried, indignantly. "You are all a set of cowards, or you would seek the man who is harming you, instead of causing trouble to one whom you wrongfully deem to be a ruffian's wife."

"We don't wish to harm you, ma'am, if we can help it, but we must use you as a shield to protect ourselves against the villainous onslaughts of Deadwood Dick," the Judge said, gravely, but kindly.

"But you are wrong. My husband is not offering you the least harm."

"Ah! I cannot credit that, ma'am. You claim to be Deadwood Dick's wife."

"Yes, I do and am proud of being so."

"And this man who aspires to drive us from Cat City Gulch, announces himself as Deadwood Dick. So you see we are not wrong."

"But it is not the original Deadwood Dick, I say," Edith declared, tears of vexation and indignation standing in her eyes. "It is some impostor who has stolen my husband's notoriety, and is using it to a devilish purpose. My husband is even now absent in search of the usurper of his name to unmask him!"

"I dare say so," the Judge replied, with a quiet smile of disbelief. "I am sorry to say that I cannot yet put faith in your protest, and shall have to hold you as a hostage. Will you promise to stay here peaceably, without attempting to escape, or shall we be obliged to confine you?"

"You can do as you please. I shall escape at the first opportunity, and you'd better lock up your weapons where I cannot get hold of them, for your lives will answer for this indignity, if I get free."

"In that case, we shall take care to not permit you to do us harm," the Judge said. "I have a pair of handcuffs among my effects. They will just about fit you, I guess."

"Say, Judge, ar' them the ones you wore when ye escaped from the penitentiary?" Slippery Sal demanded with a quizzical dryness.

"Undoubtedly," the Judge replied, smiling, at which there was a general laugh.

The handcuffs with a long slim chain attached were soon found. The latter, being long enough, was removed, and after being secured about her waist, was fastened to the wall. The handcuffs

were also placed upon her wrists, and she was indeed a prisoner.

She submitted without further argument, but the flash of her orbs evidenced the fact that she was greatly incensed at the indignity put upon her.

Daggers, the big mastiff, watched the proceedings with a sullen look and a growl of dissatisfaction, and seemed to be anxiously waiting for an invitation on the part of his mistress to wage a battle with the offending colonists.

Great were the horror and grief of Fred St. Celton, when he learned of the terrible death of his two younger brothers.

And the glances that were turned upon the fair prisoner, as the ghastly crime was discussed, were anything but promising to her future welfare.

Indeed, were they to be blamed for thirsting for vengeance upon the ruffian who was the cause of all these deaths?

The dog, Daggers, lay down before his mistress, as a sort of protective guard; yet he gazed keenly at Slippery Sal, as if believing that she was a friend.

Finally he arose with a whine, and crossing the floor to where she was sitting, sat upon his haunches, and looked wistfully up into her face.

"Git out, you purp!" she exclaimed, making a motion at him with a stick of wood, at which he slunk back to Edith, and lay down. "I nevyer was partial ter dorgs, nowhow. They're most allus troubled w' fleabotomy, or sum sich ailment."

Banished though he was, Daggers was not wholly abashed, for he continued to eye Slippery Sal drowsily.

Morning at last dawned, without any hostile movement having been made by the ruffians who were concealed in the forest.

This was not according to the expectation of the colonists, and consequently they were puzzled.

What was the cause?

If Deadwood Dick meant to fight for possession of the gulch, why did he not institute proceedings?

Or had he concluded to hold the wooded portion, and allow the colonists to retain the ground they already occupied?

These and many other conjectures agitated the minds of those within the fort.

Shortly after sunrise, a band of horsemen, numbering a dozen all told, rode into the valley from the northern gap, and took to the woods.

They were headed by a masked leader in black, and this man the settlers immediately decided was Deadwood Dick.

"That explains the reason why we have not been attacked before," Montague said. "Now, look out for warm times."

The settlers, by Judge Elliott's order, kept closely within the fort, as from the edge of the timber a rifle shot, well aimed, could kill a man standing in front of the building, so that they were obliged to use the western window as a mode of egress.

Food was now becoming alarmingly scarce, there being barely enough obtainable for another meal.

A consultation was held as to the best means of supplying the larder, but none could be devised.

To leave the fort in search of game was not practicable, inasmuch as there was great danger in so doing. And there was no other source, as Myers had refused to part with any more, from his larder.

"Perhaps we can at least send by the stages for the supply we need," Montague suggested.

"But, where's the money to come from?" the Judge demanded. "We all deposited our cash in the bank at Leadville, and I doubt if there are five dollars among the crowd."

"Ef ye want spondulicks, jest call on me," Slippery Sal said, slapping her hand upon her breeches pocket, with a smile. "I've made my pile, you bet, and you shan't starve ef et's money ye want. But let me put a flea in yer ear, Judge—don' ye harm that liddle woman over yander, ef ye don't want me ter skulp ther hull top o' your head off, I'm tellin' ye."

"You mean Deadwood Dick's wife?"

"On course I do."

"Why do you interfere in her behalf? Is she not the wife of a notorious outlaw, whose crimes are known from the Atlantic to the Pacific?"

"Thet don't make!" Sal declared. "Ef I was ther wife o' ther devel, d'ye suppose I'd be answerable an' ter blame, fer all his shiness? Not by a hanged sight! Besides, ye ken count strong on what thet gal sez. She ain't no liar, I'll allow."

"Perhaps not. Anyhow, we'll not harm her unless forced to do so. I am going to write some notices and have them sent to the chief of the gang, and see what he will have to say."

About noon Slippery Sal shouldered her rifle, and was about to leave the fort, when Montague hailed her.

"What! you are not going to leave us?" he interrogated.

"I'll allow I am, for a time!" was the reply. "Got any objections?"

"No, only that we would like to have you stay, as we may need help."

"Oh! when ye need me, ye'll find me in this immeget vicinity," was the reply, and then, with a wild laugh she strode away, along the westward trail.

Not long afterward the Kansan, Lew Lyons, followed in her tracks.

He was armed to the teeth and had declared his intention of going in search of game.

But, judging from the cunningly evil expression upon his sinister face, the game he sought was the Girl Sport.

The way in which he followed her trail, also showed that he was "no slouch" of a trailer or plainsman.

Looking neither right nor left, he continued on, following closely the trail of Slippery Sal.

It led out of the gulch basin, through the northern gap into the country that rolled away beyond—mountainous, gulch-riven, and rocky in the extreme.

He finally paused—he had need to go no further, if he was in search of Slippery Sal, for she stood before him!

She had stepped suddenly from a clump of bushes, and confronted him, a cocked revolver in her hand, and a deadly glitter in her eye.

"Halt!" she cried. "I was anticipating thet ye wanted ter hev a set-to w' me, so I jest waited, ye see. Squar' yerself, now, ef thar's any bizness in ye, an' ye want ter face a cattamount."

"That's ther verry kind o' a beast I wanten encounter!" Lyons assured, with a leer. "You lipped in a little too much, down at ther fort, and sence yure so free w' yer chin musick, I thort I'd foller ye an' test yer capacity. I don't ginerally allow no galoot ner even a galootess to adulterate my say, and when sich party do chip in, I allus scoop 'em up an' scatter 'em at furst opportunity."

"Korect! I never was in a more co-operative mood than now. Ef ye want to sample my muscle sail right in, an' I'll receive ye. Ef ye want knives, I'll make my best sculptorial attempt at carvin' ye, or, ef ye want pistollic preference, I'll salivate ye in ther latest approved manner!"

"I'll choose revolvers, at thirty paces, for me!" the villain said, with a triumphant glitter in his eye.

"All right—jest as ye please. Pace off," Slippery Sal said; "an' by the way, afore ye get ter wake, jest nominate the spot whar I shall plant ye, after I've sent ye off!"

"Most any place'll do for me," Lyons gritted, as he paced the distance, up the gulch, "an' ef ye knuckle I'll bury ye in ther first convenient mudhole."

Then with weapons ready they took their places.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN ODD ENCOUNTER.

BOTH parties were apparently cool and self-reliant—especially Slippery Sal. She seemed to have no dread of the uncertain result, for there was a twinkle of triumph in her eye, and a faint smile hovering about her lips.

Lyons, too, seemed calm, although there was a perceptible tremor to his arm, as he raised and cocked his weapon.

"Cum! ain't ye neyver goin' ter git reddey?" Sal demanded. "I'm in a hurry ter decide my futur' course o' proceedin's, an' ef it don't make no difference ter you, I'd motion thet ye be sum'at livelier—jest to make the thing interestin'."

"I'm reddey," Lyons said. "How we goin' ter get ther start off?"

"I'll tell ye a plan thet's jest as fair fer one as 'tis fer 'tother, ner thar ain't a goose's ounce o' shinnigan about et. We'll both lay flat 'pon ther ground, on our backs, w' our heads p-techin'. Then, when I yell 'keno,' ther first who kin spring inter a position fer a shot is ther best feller, an' scoops ther deck. What d'ye say?"

"I'm agreeable. I've seen et tried before."

"Then drop!"

They did drop, both flat upon the ground, on

their backs, with their arms stretched out, and their heads touching.

"Thet's ther kind," Slippery Sal declared, from her position. "Ye know ther shape ye'll lay in yer coffin now, pilgrim. How d'ye feel, jest about this time?"

"The same as before," Lyons growled. "An' ye wanten become my last earthly ailment, eh?"

"I'll kill you at sight," was the assurance.

"Then, git reddey. Mebbe ye'll disregrulate my system w' yer cuds o' affeckshun, an' mebbe, ag'in, ye won't. Mebbe I ain't an iron-clad, and mebbe I am. One! git ready. Two! Say yer prayers an' yer kitchenchisms, an' ask parding. Three! balance yerself fer ther final send-off, an' prepare to cross Jordan afoot; and lastly—'keno!'"

That was the signal—the fatal word that was to start the duel, and decide the fates of the two concerned.

And they were ready—waiting for it, that they might triumph.

Lyons made a lightning effort to raise himself, and succeeded, but before he could face around to get a shot, Slippery Sal had whopped over upon her face—a move the man from Kansas had not thought of—and the next instant her revolver spoke out spitefully.

With a groan Lyons dropped back, the blood spurting from a hole in his side.

"Curse you!" he gasped; "finish the job, and put me out of my misery."

"No! I won't do ennything like it," Sal replied. "My name's Sal Slocum, no slouch, an' I ain't no Injine ter scalp a cuss after I've lamed him, an' don't ye forget it. I'm a-goin' ter leave ye heer, an' ef ye want ter kick ther bucket, kick away. Ef ye conclude to recover, it's yer blessed privilege. But, let me tell ye, ther next time ye wanten impose on an innercent, vartuous, maidenly female, jest select sum one w'at don't war the breeches, ner ain't got no red-hot in her eye, or in all probability ye'll get planted!"

And then with a cool laugh the eccentric girl turned away, leaving Lyons where he had fallen.

At the fort the day passed without any particular incident, except when on the arrival of the southward-bound stage a sufficient purse was raised to send to Deadville for a small supply of flour, salt and beef.

About sunset, however, several of the outlaws were discovered in the edge of the forest, and Judge Elliott sent Fred St. Celton with a flag of truce and a message to Deadwood Dick to ascertain if a confab could be arranged.

Half-way between the fort and the forest the colonist went, and then paused to see if a truce would be sent out from the other side.

In a few minutes a man rode forth, upon horseback, with a handkerchief tied to his rifle barrel, and approached the spot where Fred had halted. He was masked, and clad in black, and armed with a liberal supply of belt weapons.

When he had arrived within hailing distance, he reined in his horse, and bowed, waiting, evidently, for St. Celton to speak.

Which he was not afraid to do. "Do I behold in you, Deadwood Dick, the rival claimant for this valley?" he demanded, coolly.

"You do!" was the reply, in a hoarse tone.

"And likewise the author of the ghastly crimes committed against three of our colony?"

"The same," the outlaw replied.

"You are a heartless wretch, then," St. Celton cried, fiercely, "and hanging is too good a death for you to die. Do you propose to continue your villainous persecutions?"

"I do. This gulch is rightfully mine. I came here and staked it out, and in this region we allow that he who gets first possession is owner. You came here, evidently swindled by some sharper, and took possession without any right whatever. I ordered you off, and you refused to go—defied me. Consequently, you have reaped some of the consequences, but not all, for if you persist in remaining in the gulch, you shall all die—every one of you!"

"Then we will die!" Fred St. Celton cried, hotly. "We won't be bulldozed out of our rights by a fellow of your lawless stamp. This is not what I came to say, however. I have here a paper from our leader, Judge Elliott, which will, I think, explain itself."

He extended the document in his hand, and Deadwood Dick's Double rode forward, and received it. He then rode off at a proper distance and perused it.

It seemed to give him considerable surprise, for he went over it a second time.

It ran as follows:

"DEADWOOD DICK: SIR—Inasmuch as you have declared yourself our enemy, and have foully dealt with three of our party, when they had harmed you not, we have been compelled to adopt stringent measures in order to protect ourselves against you. Therefore, we have captured and taken prisoner your wife, Edith by name, and unless you come forward, and swear by all your hopes of future salvation that you will cease your hostilities toward us, remove your men, and yield Cat City Gulch to us, now and forever henceforth, I will order your wife shot, until she is dead, in front of this fort on the morning of the 20th instant, at sunrise. To-day is the 16th. Remember! This is final.

(Signed), JUDSON ELLIOTT,
"Commanding Fort Ethel."

After perusing the notice the second time, the outlaw turned to St. Celton.

"I will consider the substance of this," he said, gravely. "In case I agree, I suppose my wife will be turned over to me?"

"Exactly. When you have sworn to the fulfillment of the things specified in that document, Edith Harris shall be turned over into your possession, and you shall be given ten minutes to get out of range of our rifles."

"Very well. I will reflect, and report at my convenience!" the outlaw replied, as he wheeled his horse, and galloped back toward the timber.

Fred St. Celton returned to the fort, and reported the result of the interview.

"I think he will come to terms," Judge Elliott declared. "But if he don't, he shall find that we shall carry out our threat to the letter."

Edith had been apprised of the plan, and received it without a word; but when she learned from Montague that there was a likelihood of her being given over to the outlaw, a frightened expression came into her eyes.

"For Heaven's sake, sir, do not give me over to that murderous wretch, whoever he may be!" she cried, piteously. "Kill me outright, rather than that, for he is not my husband, and my fate in his power would make a hundred deaths preferable to me."

"That would not help us, Mrs. Harris, to kill you, when there is a possibility of securing peace by giving you over. I pity and sympathize with you, secretly, but have no power to act in your behalf. All the others, except Ethel, second the Judge's plan, and the majority of course rules, in such a case as this."

"Then you would not see me thus made the subject of a bargain, but for the others—a horrible trade—the sacrifice of a weak woman to an unholy ruffian, to secure peace?" Edith said, tears standing in her eyes.

"Indeed I would not. If the outlaw is really not your husband it is an inhuman outrage to trade you into his power, even to secure peace. I would fight against such a thing with my last breath!"

"Thank you! thank you! Your words show that you, at least, have a heart. Never mind. Let them barter me, if they will. Perhaps I can escape from the other captor easier."

"I trust and hope you can," Montague said, earnestly.

He and Ethel alone were in favor of giving Deadwood Dick's wife her freedom, but, of course, could carry little argument against the rest, who, smarting under the blows of the gulch outlaw, were prejudiced against her whom they fully believed to be his wife. Night drew on, and spread her mantle over all objects within the mountain-locked land; still no sign was seen from the forest, of the return of Deadwood Dick.

A fierce storm was brooding along the eastern horizon, and gradually spread its black vail over the great dome above, the fierce roll of the thunder, and the spiteful lightning predicting that it was to be no mild affair.

Myers and the Chinaman, who had kept pretty closely housed since the advent of the outlaws into the valley, came over to the fort, just at dusk, and asked permission to stay there, over night, and were not refused, as the Californian appeared friendly, and as yet had shown no sign of treachery.

Fred St. Celton volunteered to go upon guard duty alone, and was so allowed.

About ten o'clock in the evening, all turned in for the night, and he was left to look after the safety of the fort.

As the storm had not yet burst he remained out of doors, and kept watch lest prowlers should get near, for he was troubled with a fear that an attack would be made by the outlaws.

But the hours dragged by until it was after midnight, yet no attack, and as it was beginning to sprinkle he turned to enter the fort, when he

saw something ahead in the darkness, that caused him to halt, abruptly.

Two gleaming balls of fire, they were, about the size of a pair of eyes, but he could see no outlines of head or face, and was unable to determine whether they belonged to man or beast.

Doubtful as to the practicability of advancing, he stood still in his tracks, and gazed steadily at the gleaming fiery orbs, that seemed to have in themselves a mocking, triumphant expression.

And the more he gazed at them the more he felt like gazing at them—a strange ecstatic feeling seemed laying hold upon him.

Was it a trance, or what?

There he stood, while the rain drops began to patter down, faster and faster—stood rigid and silent, leaning partly upon his rifle, not so much as a muscle in his body appearing to move, while his gaze continued steadfastly riveted upon the two gleaming orbs that shone out of the darkness.

Finally they began to grow nearer and nearer; slow was their approach, yet steady, until at last the owner, a masked man, loomed out of the darkness, and stood within a foot of the colonist.

A man clad in black garments, with a mask over his eyes, the lower part of his countenance being exposed to view.

A moment his fiery eyes gazed into those of the colonist—then he waved his gloved right hand before his face in several gesticulations, none of which Fred St. Celton seemed to notice. Then, with a chuckle, the masked man passed on, and into the open doorway of the fort, Fred having left the door unlatched.

Upon the threshold the masked stranger paused, and peered into the great apartment before him, which was dimly lighted by a single candle.

Evident it was that he preferred to look before he leaped.

The apartment was a large one, and the colonists and their families occupied beds dotted about, here and there—those old-fashioned curtain beds which belonged to the days of our ancestors.

Therefore, while the prowler could see the curtain bedsteads, he could not see the occupants.

He listened several minutes, but as he heard only the suppressed breathing, he seemed reassured, and stepped softly into the cabin-fort.

A glance showed him where Edith Harris was confined, and he stole toward her with cautious steps.

She was lying upon a hastily improvised couch that had been furnished her, and was evidently asleep.

Not so with the great mastiff, Daggers.

He arose promptly to his feet from a position beside the couch, and sniffed the air inquiringly. Then he wagged his tail familiarly, as if he recognized the intruder.

"Sh! Dag, old boy!" the masked man whispered. "Lay down, and be quiet."

As if fully understanding the words addressed to him, the dog obeyed; then the night prowler stole forward and bent over the recumbent form of Edith, as she lay in slumber!

CHAPTER IX.

A CASE OF MESMERISM AND A WOMAN'S WIT.

"Edith! Edith!"

It was the voice of the stranger hushed to a whisper, that called.

The sleeper aroused with a start, and probably would have screamed at sight of the speaker but for his motioned injunction for her to be silent, accompanied by hasty, whispered words.

"Sh! don't alarm the others. 'Tis I, Dick—your husband!"

"Oh! thank Heaven!" Edith breathed in relief. "I see now, Daggers knows you, and would permit no other man to approach."

"True. Daggers is a faithful friend and protector," Deadwood Dick returned, in the same guarded tone. "Tell me when you were brought here and what for?"

Edith accordingly narrated, in as few words as possible, what is already known to the reader—how she had been captured as a shield against the pseudo Deadwood Dick, and the proposed barter that was to be made.

"Curse them!" the ex-Prince of the Road muttered, fiercely. "I would be their friend, but they are taking the wrong course to win my friendship. I scarcely know what to do in this case."

"Free me, my husband, and let's flee from this spot!" Edith suggested, eagerly.

"No, I cannot do that. It would not be the

square thing. These colonists hold you and treat you as a prisoner of war, and, under the circumstances, they do right, as they deem you to be my wife, and me the outlaw who is giving them so much trouble. Do they treat you respectfully?"

"Yes, I am treated civilly, although with two exceptions, I am regarded sternly and un pityingly."

"Very well. I see you are not actually suffering, except in spirit, and that fact takes a great weight from my mind. I must not tarry longer, as some of the colonists may awaken."

"Oh! are you not going to take me with you, my husband?"

"Not now, pet. We are miles from our home, and I would have no place to take you. You had best remain here, for the present. If they attempt to kill you, be of brave heart in the knowledge that I will be near and ready to protect you."

"But in case the Double comes to take advantage of their offer?"

"Go with him, the same as if you knew it were I, and take assurance in the fact that I, your husband, so directed you," Deadwood Dick said.

"I will do as you have told me," Edith replied, trying to be very brave, although the tears would spring into her eyes.

"Of course you will, my pet, and now goodbye until you see me again, which I trust will not be a long time hence," he said, kissing her, and receiving in return her loving caress.

Then he turned to leave the fort, but stopped short, with a stifled exclamation of disappointment, for not a dozen yards away stood Tom St. Celton, holding a lighted candle in one hand, and a cocked revolver in the other, the latter being leveled at the breast of the ex-road Prince.

A triumphant smile was upon the face of the colonist, and he stood coolly gazing at Deadwood Dick, with the air of one who had gained the complete mastery, as he imagined he had, over the famous outlaw. So he thought, but he reckoned wrongly.

Scarce were the men who had ever been successful in holding Deadwood Dick long in abeyance to their will, and Tom St. Celton was no exception to the rule, burly and strong though he was.

The very fact that he stood gazing triumphantly at his supposed captured game, was where he lost, for the eyes of Deadwood Dick met his in a steady gaze, and after a moment, feeling a strange sensation stealing over him, he found it literally impossible to overcome the fascination of the gleaming orbs of the ex-road-agent.

Rigid he grew in his tracks, vacancy of expression taking the place of brilliancy in his eyes. Then, Deadwood Dick stepped forward, and waved his hand in front of his face, and Tom St. Celton was effectually done for, for the time being, although he looked grim and dangerous, as he stood positioned in the middle of the floor in a warlike attitude.

"Weapons keener than daggers, have I," Deadwood Dick whispered, triumphantly, as he glided back to kiss Edith once more. "Be of good cheer, now, and I'll be on hand, again, by-and-by."

Then he turned and stole from the fort—out into the pouring night, with its crashing, pounding thunder, and its vivid lightning.

As he passed the spot where Fred St. Celton yet stood, he passed his hand several times before his eyes, and then darted on into the stormy darkness.

So that ere Fred St. Celton had recovered from the mesmeric trance into which Deadwood Dick had first thrown him and afterward relieved him, that knight of the trail had successfully made his escape.

Although in a trance, Fred had been aware that some figure had flitted past him into the fort, and no sooner did he recover sufficiently than he dashed out of the rain, into the great room, to see if all was right.

Then he saw Tom St. Celton standing in the middle of the floor, holding a candle in one hand, and a revolver in the other, the latter aimed at Edith Harris, who sat pale and awestricken, upon the edge of her couch, with the big dog, Daggers, sitting close beside her.

"Hello!" Fred exclaimed, as he beheld the sight—"what the deuce does this mean. What are you up to, Tom, old boy?"

No answer! Poor Tom was incapable of moving even his tongue.

Thinking it queer, Fred approached nearer, and slapped him on the shoulder.

"I say, hang it, why don't you answer a

fellow? What the blazes you doing, standing here pointing your pistol at the prisoner?"

Still Thomas continued to gaze straight at Edith, in a vacant way, not moving so much as a muscle, or paying the least attention to Fred's words, or presence.

"Well, may I be kicked if this ain't mighty queer," the young man muttered. "He appears to be awake, and yet is as mum as a deaf crab. I wonder if I can't bring him to his senses." And putting his lips in the region of Tom's left ear, he gave vent to an ear-splitting yell.

But it had no apparent effect, except to arouse the whole fort, the men hastily putting in an appearance, while the females peeped in alarm from their curtained beds.

"What under the heavens is the matter, Fred?" the senior St. Celton demanded, as he approached, in company with the others.

"That's precisely what I'd like to know, myself!" was the reply. "Just look at Tom standing here, as if struck dumb. You can't get a confounded word out of him, to save your life."

"I can explain what may seem to you a mystery, if you will allow me!" Edith said, speaking from her place of confinement, in a tone that all could hear.

"The gentleman you call Tom is mesmerized, and all your efforts to arouse him will be unavailing, unless you understand how to do it."

"How came he mesmerized?" Judge Elliott demanded, sternly.

"That is easily explained," Edith replied, coolly. "My husband, the original and genuine Deadwood Dick, is possessed of wonderful mesmeric power, and has it in his power to put any person into a trance whose eye he can catch in a steady gaze, and whose mind is weaker than his own. He came here to see me to-night, while you were slumbering, and as he was about to depart yonder personage blocked his path in the exact attitude you see him now, and was thus mesmerized."

"But, how did this marvelous husband of yours effect an entrance to the fort?" the Judge demanded with a frown. "Fred, you perhaps can best answer this question!"

"I don't know," the young colonist answered. "I believe I was mesmerized too, when I came to think of it. I remember of seeing a pair of eyes staring at me out of the darkness, but suddenly forgot all about it, except that I felt mighty funny. I also remember seeing something like a man's figure flitting by me toward the fort, but had no power or inclination to give chase. A little while ago I awoke to find myself standing out yonder, in front of the fort, in a drenching rain."

"You were undoubtedly mesmerized, too, but my husband probably passed you out of the trance when he took his departure," Edith added.

"This is the strangest piece of business I ever heard of," Judge Elliott declared, angrily. "You state that all our efforts to restore this young man to consciousness will be of no avail, do you?"

"I do, unless you have the proper directions. He would not live long in that state."

"Where will we seek these directions, then?"

"I could tell you how to do it if I chose," Edith replied, coolly. "My husband taught me once, that I might know."

"Then, tell us at once. It will not do to let him remain thus."

"Mr. Elliott, you hold my life in your hands, and propose to use me to whatever purpose may best serve you, even if you have to kill me. Tell me, is this not so?"

"You have undoubtedly struck close to the truth; yes," the Judge replied. "You being the wife of a bloody-handed, outlawed ruffian, you cannot expect to have much respect or mercy shown you."

"Exactly," Edith replied, pale, but very calm. "I supposed that was how you regarded me. I am a prisoner of war, and you hold my life at your disposal. Yonder, helplessly, stands another prisoner, whose life I hold at my disposal. Thus the case is pretty even, I believe!"

The colonists exchanged glances. They saw that it was as Edith had intimated—they had not all the power on their side.

"Surely you would not let this young man die in this condition, when you could easily save him?" Judge Elliott said, endeavoring to argue the point.

"Surely you will not let me die, or fall into the power of a ruthless wretch whom you are afraid to battle except by doubtful stratagem," Edith returned, coolly. "The matter is just about as broad as it is long, sir, and I think,

upon reflection, that you will conclude that it is advisable to come to me for terms, since the tables have turned half-way."

"Well, what terms do you propose?" the Judge demanded, vexed that his plan should be thus baffled by a woman, and a very young one at that.

"I will tell you," Edith replied, calmly. "I have been thinking the matter over, and think a better plan can be arranged. If this man who calls himself Deadwood Dick comes for me, you are to say that I am not willing to go with him, except on different terms—that he must first prove himself capable of taking care of me by fighting a duel. One of you must fight with him, or if you are all cowards, and timid about fronting him, free my hands, and I will meet him myself. In this way you can provide for peace, without sacrificing my life, or putting me in the power of that ruffian. For unless he kills his opponent, I am not to be given up to him, and yet he is to grant you peaceful possession of this valley."

"But, there will be no one volunteer to fight this ruffian!"

"Then I cannot save the life of the entranced colonist," Edith said, firmly. "You have no mercy for me, and I must force you to have, or else you must lose one of your members. This is final!"

The announcement of course was not favorably received by the colonists, but it appeared to be the only chance for saving Tom St. Celton's life.

Montague and Ethel were both secretly pleased, but refrained from expressing their sentiments at that time. They both regarded Edith Harris favorably, and saw that she was but justly defending herself.

Finding that there was no other plan left, the Judge ordered a canvass among the colonists, to see who should encounter the bloodthirsty gulch outlaw, and Fred St. Celton finally volunteered.

Whereupon Judge Elliott reported the fact to Edith.

"Very well," she said, calmly. "All you have to do is to swear you will carry out the plan, and I will tell you how to bring yonder young gentleman out of his trance."

"I swear, upon my honor as a gentleman, to have the plan suggested by you, carried out to the letter, in case you free Tom St. Celton from this mesmeric trance!" Judge Elliott said, solemnly.

"Good! Hurrah for the Judge's resolve!" Montague cried.

"It is well," Edith said. "I think upon reflection you will all admit that it is better for a man to fight the battle, than a woman's life and a wife's honor. Mr. St. Celton can be brought out of that trance in only one manner, except by the mesmerizer in person—and that way is by standing him upon his head for a few moments, and tickling the bottoms of his feet. It may seem a very simple plan, but trial will convince you of its efficacy."

Accordingly the directions were followed, and five minutes afterward Tom St. Celton was able to walk about in full possession of his senses.

Morning dawned, before they were scarcely aware of it; a wet, drizzling day was the promise succeeding the night's thunder-storm.

Soon after sunrise Deadwood Dick was seen to ride from the forest toward the fort, masked and armed, but carrying a truce flag, and it was surmised that he was coming to accept the Judge's proposition.

CHAPTER X. THE DUEL.

FROM the fort the colonists eagerly watched the approaching horseman, for his coming was a matter of considerable moment to them.

Should he agree to what the Judge would propose, there would be a duel, and perhaps the loss of another man to the colony, for, though brave to a fault, Fred St. Celton was no duelist, having never been engaged in such a contest.

Nearer and nearer the outlaw rode, until he drew rein before the door of the fort. And about the same minute Slippery Sal made her appearance upon the scene, coming in by the northern trail.

As the outlaw drew rein, the colonists crowded without the fort, eager to gaze upon the ruffian who had caused them so much sorrow, but their eagerness was because of a bitter craving for vengeance.

"I am here!" Deadwood Dick's Double announced. "I have come for my wife, pursuant to the agreement in a letter which I received."

"Very well. We are prepared to give up your lady, sir, but not on the same terms which I offered, as she objects. She declares that you are not the genuine Deadwood Dick, and that she is not your wife."

"Ha! ha! that is a well manufactured lie, but will not pass muster. Perhaps she refuses to go with me, then?"

"She does, until you prove to her satisfaction that you are man enough to protect her. In order to do this, she has suggested that you fight a duel with one of our party."

"Ho! ho! Is that so? What member of your gang would be my opponent, then?" and the gaze of the outlaw swept the crowd sharply.

"I am the man, Sir Outlaw!" Fred St. Celton said, stepping forward, with great coolness. "I have volunteered to meet you with pistols, and am ready at any time."

"Hurrah! That's ther checker!" Slippery Sal said, coming up. "That's ther way I like ter heer things work. You're all solid, St. Celton, an' I'll bet a yaller dorg on et, ev'ry day in a week."

"I will not object to meeting this gent," the pseudo Deadwood Dick declared, "but I first want to understand the business. If we fight, and I win, I am to have possession of the girl and this valley?"

"Exactly. And if St. Celton wins, we likewise retain possession of both," the Judge explained.

"All well. I will meet your man in duel, with that understanding; if I fall, I am to withdraw my men, and all claim upon the valley—if he falls, I am to have positive and undisputed possession of the valley, and of my wife, Edith, whom I dearly prize."

And so saying, the outlaw waved his hand in the air, and a moment later a party of horsemen rode from the forest toward the fort—a dozen, all told, masked, well-mounted, and well armed. As they drew near, the colonists drew weapons, suspiciously, but the assumed Deadwood Dick smiled beneath his mask and said:

"Have no fear. They come under my truce, and will not harm you, except you try to play gum games."

The outlaws soon arrived and drew rein, and then their leader turned to them.

"Pards," he said, "I am about to fight a duel, and I desire that you see fair play. My opponent stands yonder. Our weapons will be revolvers. In case I fall, these colonists are to retain possession of this valley, and we are to disturb them no more. If, however, he falls in the contest, we are to have the valley and the possession of my wife. Do you understand?"

There was a silent nod from the outlaws, which signified that they did, whereupon the outlaw leader turned to St. Celton, saying:

"I am ready, now, sir. Please take your choice of distance and position, and let's get to business."

"Very well. A hundred yards apart, face to face, will do me," Fred said, quite as calmly as his opponent.

Accordingly the distance was measured—fifty yards along the stage trail in each direction, from directly in front of the fort door.

At her expressed desire, Edith Harris was allowed to come without the fort, Montague and Ethel keeping her company.

When all was in readiness, the two duelists drew their weapons, and walked to the respective ends of their line, where they faced about, preparatory for business.

The settlers had also drawn their weapons as had the companion outlaws of the bogus Deadwood Dick, each party seeming to suspect the other of premeditated treachery.

"Now, then, get ready, gentlemen," Judge Elliott cried, stepping forward. "At the word 'Go,' you will both fire. It is not necessary that your aim should be deadly, but one or the other must fall from the effect of wounds, ere the case can be decided."

"Kerect! and I'm ther gal as hain't afeard ter bet my head that St. Celton wins. He's a nervy cuss, you bet, an' et takes a hull horse ter git around him, an' don't ye mind et. Ef I war goin' ter stack my chips on either o' them galoots, I'd say ther outlaw is a-goin' ter git scooped fer every consarned cent he's worth."

"Get ready!" cried the Judge, and the cocked weapons of the duelists came to a level. Both men were apparently cool—not a perceptible sign of agitation or fear did either evince.

"One! two! three!" counted the Judge, in measured tones. "Go!"

Instantaneously the weapons of the duelists rung out clear and spiteful, but neither man

left his trucks, although the outlaw flinched a trifle.

"Hurrah! ther furst fusilade didn't drap a man!" Slippery Sal cried. "Not a pilgrim! But ther ain't nothin'. See'd a duel oncet, over in Nevada, whar two cusses stud an' plugged away at each other, fer a hull half a day, an' neyver drew a ounce o' blood. An' now, ef we're goin' ter hev a repetition o' thet affair, I argy ther we sail in an' finish up, ter suit our own complexion."

"One! two—three! Go!" again cried the Judge, and as before pistols cracked, sharply.

Still neither party fell, although it was St. Celton's turn, this time, to flinch slightly.

"Cum! cum! fer Heav'n's sake don't keep us in suspense!" Sal cried, impatiently. "Jest open an artery, so we kin see ther red. Ef ye don't we shall all die o' ennui!"

"Yes, gentlemen, please be brief in this matter," Judge Elliott added. "It is no child's play, and the sooner decided, the better."

Then, after a moment, for the third time came the order:

"One! two—three! Go!"

And for the third time the weapons shot forth a tiny flash of fire, and the bullet wended forth on its deadly mission, while a shudder ran through the little knot of colonists.

For there seemed to be the sound of death in the crack of the weapon.

A moment both men stood defiantly erect, after the exchange of shots—then, with a stifled curse the pseudo Deadwood Dick dropped forward upon his face, while a loud cheer burst from the lips of the colonists at their victory.

A movement on their part to approach the fallen outlaw, was checked by the leader of the mounted ruffians—a burly fellow whose voice sounded alike to that of Bob Jones.

"Hold up!" he commanded, riding forward, with the others at his heels. "The duel's up, and thet's all ye've got ter do about et. We'll take keer o' ther Capt'n, an' ye needn't bother yersel's!"

"Very well," Elliott said. "We've won, and shall expect your early evacuation of the valley."

"That's jest as the Capt'n sez," was the reply: then the outlaws raised the wounded outlaw, and carried him away in the direction of the forest, to the east, while the colonists turned to look after Fred St. Celton, who had drawn near, only a couple of slight flesh wounds the worse for his encounter.

"You did nobly, my boy!" Judge Elliott exclaimed, warmly grasping his hands, as did the others. "But for you we should have been in honor bound to give up the valley which you have clearly won for us!"

"And I want to thank the gentleman for so bravely preserving me from a most terrible fate," Edith Harris added, coming forward, and touching Fred's hand, reverently. "But for your success, sir, I should now be in the power of a ruthless wretch, who regards neither the laws of God nor man."

"I am glad that I was able to so serve you, lady," St. Celton said, gallantly; "but, unless I guess wrongly, we have not seen the last of the ruffian and his band. Foiled in his attempt to kill me and get possession not only of you but of the valley, he is not the man to back off, as long as he has a foot of ground to stand upon."

"Then you think he will not keep his promise, by vacating, eh?" Judge Elliott demanded.

"I am almost sure of it. He is as evil at heart as a man well can be, and if I mistake not, he will now resort to other means to gain sole possession of this valley, which undoubtedly is rich in mineral wealth."

Fred St. Celton's views were shared by Montague and several others; consequently, Judge Elliott gave orders for all to keep closely within the fort, until it was known for certain what course the outlaws were going to adopt.

If they broke their promise by continuing to occupy the valley, it was the determination of the colonists to resist to the bitter end.

By the noon stage Montague was dispatched to Leadville for a fresh supply of ammunition and provisions, and in the meantime, those remaining at the fort kept close within doors, and on the watch for hostile movements.

But, night drew on, and no sign of them was seen, except the smoke of camp-fires that rose above the trees in the basin.

"Don't ye fergit it, you'll not see 'em leave the valley yet," Slippery Sal averred, "an' I reckon it behooves me, in ther interest o' humanity, to explorate an' see w'at 'em cusses ar' doin'. So, ef ye need me, all ye'll hev ter do will be ter screech 'Sal!' an' I'll be on deck!"

And then, taking her gun, she departed.

The night shadows were hovering dense and dark over the valley, when we penetrate the deep forest, and arrive at the outlaw's camp, consisting of a large rude cabin, hastily erected, with a large bonfire blazing in front of it, and a corral, near by, for the horses.

Inside the cabin the outlaws were congregated—some were rolled in their blankets near the fire; others were gambling and drinking; some were reading and some were cleaning their weapons.

Their captain was pacing to and fro, a dark expression about his mouth and coming from his eyes that gleamed through the holes in his mask.

That he was not sorely wounded was evident, for his stride was strong and his movements elastic.

Without a word to those gathered around him, he continued to pace to and fro, until another outlaw entered the cabin, the mud upon his garments telling that he was but recently from the saddle.

"Ha! Davis, is it you?" the chief demanded. "I am glad. What news bring you from the old camp, up the Tartoise, for it is of there I would hear?"

"The news is not of a pleasant nature, Captain," Davis replied, unbelting himself. "The sheriff and his posse have cleaned the place out, and only two of the boys escaped with their lives."

"Furies! this is bad business! What else?"

"Much. The sheriff is scenting after your trail, and as he comes this way, no doubt but he will locate you."

"Curse him, let him come. We'll be in waiting to receive him, after we've cleaned out the accursed colonists. What else?"

"A letter, chief. It was handed me just after I entered the valley, with the instructions to give it to you."

"Ah! what kind of a man was the giver?" the outlaw demanded.

"I do not know, as it was so dark that I could scarcely see him. I am of the impression, however, that he was masked."

With eager fingers the outlaw chief tore open the envelope, and hastened to peruse it.

Written in a plain but elegant chirography, it was easy to decipher, and he read it over, his face growing dark below his mask, and his eyes gleaming with a suddenly wrought fierceness.

This was what he read:

"Sir: You are using my title, without any authority or permission from me, and I must request you to drop it, at once, or I shall be under the necessity of dropping you. Understand me—I mean business. Your career of outlawry is adding stain after stain to my somewhat famous title, and I again command you to 'cheese it,' and pick up another name. Also, you'd better get out of this part of the country immediately unless you are a candidate for a tarred-rope picnic.

"I advise you to puckachee.

"DEADWOOD DICK."

A growl of anger escaped the outlaw as he flung the paper upon the floor, and ground it beneath his heel.

"What else, Davis?" he demanded, as he turned to the courier who still stood in waiting.

"A man, chief, whom I found wounded, near the trail. He belonged to the colony, and wants to see you."

"Is he here?"

"No. I left him where I found him, and promised to notify you at once," the courier replied.

CHAPTER XI.

VILLAINS PLANNING.

"I WILL go," Deadwood Dick's Double said. "This man may be of use to me in fighting these accursed colonists. Direct me, Davis, that I may find this fellow."

"You will find him, chief, in Gorgon's Gulch, beyond the basin, to the north. Walk five paces from an old pine stump, due northward; then turn eastward, and enter thicket. You will find the chap in a small glade in this thicket."

"It is well. I will go at once, under the cover of darkness. If aught should happen of importance previous to my return, give me the alarm in the usual way."

Donning a heavy coat, and pulling the slouch hat he wore down over his eyes, he then looked to his weapons and stepped out into the night.

A rapid gait soon took him away from the camp, when he slackened his pace and exercised more caution in his movements, for it was very dark, and the outlaw knew not how many foes might be lurking in the gloom.

He was not a particularly brave man, this brigand who had appropriated the name of Deadwood Dick. Indeed, at heart he was a thorough coward, but, by a rough, boastful manner, he contrived to produce the impression that he was a hard customer.

With cautious steps he stole along through the forest, on the alert with both eye and ear.

Finally he reached the edge of the timber, whence he could command a view of the fort, and here he paused, and gazed keenly about him.

Not a dozen yards distant to his left was the grave of Royce Elliott, and his gaze wandered to it as a chuckle escaped his lips.

"I fixed him cursedly nice," he muttered, "and wish the rest of the gang were served the same way. But, never fear! They shall not long usurp my rights. I'll crush them, one by one, until not a shadow of them shall haunt the gulch!"

And gritting his teeth, he took his course once more across the valley toward the northern gap, to find the man Lyons.

In due time he arrived at the spot mentioned by Davis, and found a man lying upon a plot of grass, apparently asleep.

A slight shaking, however, aroused him, and he uttered a fierce growl at being disturbed.

"What d'ye want?" he growled, angrily.

"Who are you?"

"I am Deadwood Dick," was the reply, as the outlaw produced and turned on the light of a small bull's-eye lantern. "One of my men stated that you wished to see me; so I came."

"Oh! you're the chief o' ther gang, eh?" Lyons demanded with a groan.

"I am the chief," was the reply.

"But not the original Deadwood Dick?"

"What does that concern you, sir?"

"Not much, only I reckoned I twigg'd you," the Kansan replied; "don't make no difference who ye be, so long's you're not over scrupulous, which I opine ye ain't."

"Not over scrupulous, I presume," the road-runner replied. "If you've anything to propose, I'm open."

Lyons raised himself to a rest upon his elbow.

"I've got a wound that has made me rather lazy; still, I am better than a half-dozen dead men. I was dropped by thet gal who hangs about the fort under the name of Slippery Sal. Who she is, is more than I can tell. But, thet ain't to ther p'int; I want thet gal, Ethel Elliott, the Judge's daughter, and I'm goin' ter have her, ef I have to work till I'm gray as a badger. But I'll allow et ain't no healthy job fer a man ter try ter gobble onter her alone, an' accordingly, I want help. D'ye see?"

"You want my aid, eh?" Deadwood Dick's Double demanded.

"Exactly, an' ef ye aire a-might to, we kin work the game successful. You've a notion after the woman, Edith Harris, I take et, and ef ye want'er go in snacks wif me, we'll capture 'em both, at the same time."

"Good. I'd give much to get the woman, Edith, into my power. But how would you manage it? I have no access to the fort."

"That need make no difference. I have, and that will answer the same purpose. Say we select to-morrow night as the time for the job. When the fort is asleep, I will silence the guard, and you can be near, ready to enter. After that, it will be an easy matter to creep upon the girls, and gag them and make our escape."

"All right! I'll be lurking in the vicinity, soon after dusk, with horses ready. In the meantime, do not be surprised if I attempt to take the fort. All you need do is to keep out of rifle range."

"Ha! ha! yes. I'll look out for myself. By the way, lend me a swaller from your canteen, and then I'll rest a little longer before attempting to reach the fort."

Deadwood Dick's Double passed over the can, and Lyons took a big swig before returning it.

Then the outlaw departed, directing his footsteps toward the fort; but he passed wide of that building, and entered the forest at the same point where he had quitted it. But he had taken only a few steps into the forest, when he paused, abruptly, an exclamation of horror leaping from his lips.

He tried to retreat, but he was rooted to the spot, and could not. He would have drawn his

weapons, but his hands were as powerless as his feet.

Before him, not a half-dozen yards away, stood the ghost of Gorgon's Gulch—the spectral horse and rider that twice had been seen in the edge of the wood by the colonists, but never until now by the bogus Deadwood Dick. It stood in the center of a little natural glade, into which the outlaw had taken several steps before he had noticed it—stood there, grim and ghostly, the figure in the saddle being a perfect counterpart of what Royce Elliott had been in life, except that the eyes were now closed and the lips slightly parted by the falling of the lower jaw, while a strange, whitish halo of light surrounded both horse and rider.

The fact that the outlaw was none too courageous, and was inclined to be superstitious, but added to his terror, for he readily recognized the Phantom Horseman as the victim of his diabolical scheme, and quaked with fear at being thus confronted by a spirit of the dead, for such he really believed the apparition to be.

For several moments the specter remained motionless, but finally it began to come nearer upon its snowy horse, until but a couple of yards intervened between it and the outlaw.

Then the horse came to a halt, and trembling from head to foot the outlaw gazed with a horrible fascination at the white-robed thing, be it spirit or human.

Not a movement of the specter was there, except that the lower jaw suddenly closed, with a snap, and a moment later the lips began to move and form words that the outlaw heard with increased horror.

"Aha!" the specter spoke, in a strange, chilling tone; "aha! I have thee, now, ruffian and murderer! For days I have been searching for thee—ever since thou deprived my earthly body of its life. Knowest me, thou cringing cur? I am Royce Elliott, in the spirit instead of the flesh!"

A faint gasp came from the wretch, but that was all. He shook in every limb, but affright had sealed his tongue.

"Thou knowest me," the specter continued, with a frightful laugh; "thou couldst not forget me so soon, nor the agency thou hadst in causing my spirit to take its flight from the earthly tabernacle for the realms above. No! not thou well rememberst me, and tremble at my approach like the monster thou art, to thy very heart's core. Aha! I see thee, even without eyes. And thou fearest me! Well thou mayest, for I have come for thee—come to transport thee to the border of a lake of fire that burneth with brimstone. Art thou ready to go?"

"No! no! Spare me! spare me!" the outlaw gasped, his terror becoming greater each moment. "I beg your forgiveness—anything—everything—only don't kill me!"

"Didst not thy hands poison the water that killed Royce Elliott, villain?" the specter cried, sternly. "Didst not thy hands help to behead the St. Celson brothers? And yet thou beggest for mercy, thou craven!"

"Ayl! I'll own my guilt—I'll admit the truth of what you say—but still I want to live that I may by good deeds atone for the past. Spare me, and ask of me anything you will, and I will grant it."

There was an awful moment of silence, during which neither spoke.

If his ghostship had heard the words of the outlaw he was evidently giving them consideration.

Finally the deathly lips moved again, and the specter spoke:

"Thou shalt have a reprieve of life upon one condition, which is: that thou shalt forever quit this valley and withdraw your claim. Refuse, and I will smite you down where you now stand!"

"I promise that, and swear to it," Deadwood Dick's Double said, eagerly, "and, with your permission, I will away to order my men from the valley at once."

"Ayl! go, and see that another sunrise does not find you within this valley. Go!" and the specter's fore-finger pointed in the direction of the outlaw camp.

Without waiting for a second invitation the miscreant found strength to stride on into the depths of the forest, leaving the ghost of Royce Elliott in possession of the glade.

Straight to his stronghold the outlaw went, and aroused what of his followers were not awake.

"Awake! Get ready!" he shouted, standing in the center of the cabin, and blowing upon a small bugle when not speaking. "Look to your arms and prepare to steal a march upon the

fort within the hour. Sufficient long these colonist dogs have usurped my rights, and now they must go, or die, and I'd rather kill 'em than not. To-night they will not be expecting us, and it will be our very opportunity to surround and take 'em!"

In the meantime the colonists were doing the very reverse of the scoundrel's calculations—were watching for an expected attack.

Every one within the fort was expecting an attack, and was prepared to fight for the possession of the gulch.

"I tell ye what, feller-cityzens," said old Bill Myers, removing his grimy clay pipe long enough to speak—"I tell ye what, feller-cityzens, ef ye don't see things smoke afore mornin', I've lost my reckonin'. Here's me and my right bower, Sing Song—we've tramped tergether these three years, an' Sing, he'll tell ye I nevyer in thet hull time predicted wrong. Eh? Sing?"

"No wrongee—Myers muchee sure," the celestial replied with a nod.

"I, too, am of the opinion that there will be an attack before morning," St. Celton, Sr., added. "And ten to one we shall be conquered."

"Never!" Fred St. Celton said, fiercely. "We may get whipped, but never conquered by this outlaw demon. Here is one right hand that will fight when the rest of the body is cold!"

"And here another!" Edith Harris said, eagerly. "But place a rifle in my hand, when it comes to fighting, and I will show you that I am loyal."

"You shall be tested!" Judge Elliott said. "And if you turn out to be as you have all along claimed, we shall have many apologies to offer you."

"None of which you need offer, as they are not asked for. You have treated me as a prisoner of war, and I have not suffered. Therefore, I shall not be revengeful."

"I wish Montague and the girl Slippery Sal were here, and I think we could defy them for a time, at least," Warwick said.

"We can, as it is!" Edith declared coolly. "Don't fear for your personal safety, for, should great danger menace, you can depend upon it that my husband, the genuine Deadwood Dick will be on hand."

Somehow her words inspired hope in the hearts of the colonists, even though they were doubtful of there being any difference in their present enemy, and the other Deadwood Dick.

That there were two persons bearing the same name was beyond their understanding.

Slowly the night dragged away; midnight came, still no signs of the outlaws.

By having all lights extinguished within the fort, they were able to see the lay of the country, without, and distinguish objects at a short distance away.

About two hours before daydawn, when the night was the darkest, dusky objects were seen moving in the clearing, to the east of the fort.

"The outlaws, sure pop," old Bill Myers announced. "They're creepin' up, thinkin' ther fort's asleep. Git red dy now, ev'ry mother's son an' darter of ye, and we'll see ef we ken't wake up the varmints. Fill every loop-hole, an' pick out yer man, an' when ye heer my clarion note ag'in, give 'em salt an' pepper till they're thoroughly seasoned, fer cayote feasts."

The loop-holes were promptly manned and 'womaned,' for that matter, and the approaching figures were covered, as one by one they made their appearance, out of the gloom.

Five—ten—twenty—thirty there were, all told, although there appeared to be a hundred of the dusky forms. "Now! git ready," cried Myers. "One! two—three—fire!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE OLD ORIGINAL TO THE FRONT.

The cry of Myers was instantaneously answered by the crack of a dozen rifles in concert.

Then, from the black night without welled up another cry—a wild yell of pain and rage, coming from the outlaws, for almost every bullet of the colonists had taken effect.

"Hurra! thet's ther way ter give 'em jessy!" Myers cried, delightedly. "See, they're re-treating! Give em another blizzard before they get out of sight."

Accordingly the repeating rifles spoke again, spitefully, and another dozen of the outlaws went down, either dead or wounded. Deadly practice was this, and in consternation the remaining ruffians retreated from view.

Enough had they had of the colonists to convince them that everybody in the fort was wide awake and prepared for all emergencies.

"It no use wasting more life!" Deadwood Dick's Double said, with a bitter curse. "Get back to the stronghold, and wait until to-morrow night. Then will I turn a trump card, for which there will be no alternative. Enough of this shabby kind of warfare has there been, and we'll now come down to business."

Under the same cover of darkness a horseman left the gulch basin, a few moments after the conclusion of the brisk battle, passing through the south gap over the Leadville trail.

Once out of the basin, he put the spurs to his horse, and they flew swiftly down through the gloomy canyon-like seam in the rugged face of nature, the horse evincing an unusual degree of knowledge in selecting the easiest portions of the trail, and the rider sitting in the saddle with apparent ease. On down the canyon they went, until its intersection with the Kennedy Gulch trail to Fairplay was reached; then the horse was reined in, and the rider removed a mask from his face, and stored it away into one of the pockets of the jacket he wore. Once the mask was removed, a handsome face was revealed—a peculiar face, adorned with imperial and mustache, and lightly by a pair of magnetic black eyes, which shone brightly with a resolute expression.

Armed with rifle and revolver was this night-rider, and evidently familiar with the country around him, for he soon turned into Kennedy Gulch, and struck off in a gallop again.

For an hour he rode thus, and just as day was beginning to break in the east, he dashed down a little descent, right into the heart of a little camp that was pitched in a sort of a tree-strewn pocket.

The embers of a campfire smoldered at the foot of an old hemlock, and around them, upon the ground, a party of men were rolled in their blankets, fast asleep.

But they hastily arose, a round dozen of them in number, as the horseman dashed up, and weapons were plentifully drawn.

"You needn't mind about pulling your pop-guns, gentlemen!" the new-comer said, with a smile, as he drew rein. "I'm not a dangerous chap, generally, unless ye rile me."

"Well, you know it's always best to be ready, in case of emergency," replied the leader of the party, a small wiry fellow, with iron-gray hair and mustache, and an eye as keen as a hawk's.

"Certainly," the stranger replied, bowing assent. "If you never allow yourself to be taken at fault, ten chances to one you will never be taken at all. I believe I have the pleasure of addressing John Webb, the sheriff of this county, have I not?"

"You have, sir. My name is John Webb. May I also ask your name?"

"Yes, I am Edward Harris, *alias* Deadwood Dick, ex-road-agent!" the stranger replied, coolly, at which announcement the sheriff and his men stared.

"You, Deadwood Dick!" the officer ejaculated, allowing his hand again to drop upon the butt of his revolver.

"Yes, I am Deadwood Dick, but you have no power to arrest me. I am a free man, and have the papers to prove it. It is not as an enemy that I come, but as a friend."

"Well, sir, let's hear your errand. I've heard so many evil reports of you, in the past, that you must really excuse me for standing on my guard, you know!"

Deadwood Dick laughed.

"You do quite right!" he said. "You would do wrong to trust even yourself, too far. My errand I will briefly state. You are, doubtless, aware of the location of Cat City, and Gorgon's Gulch, some miles to the north-east?"

"I have heard of the same, yes."

"Well, not long ago a party of Virginians traded their homes for the Cat City Basin, and emigrated there with the intention of colonizing and settling the tract for which they had traded."

"But they have been bitterly opposed by a gang of ruffians headed by a fellow who calls himself Deadwood Dick, having appropriated my old title, and by his crimes under that name, endangered the freedom granted me by the Governor. Learning that you were in this vicinity, upon an outlaw hunt, I came hither to see if I could not prevail upon you to scoop in this gang, on your way, and thus not only relieve me of an unpleasant position, but also rescue these colonists from an unpleasant situation."

John Webb gave vent to a strange, prolonged whistle.

"Why, hang it, this is the very chap I'm

hunting for, but have not been able to find. He's been raising the devil generally, up around Fairplay, and only last night we took his old stronghold, and licked out a lot of his men. But I supposed all the time that there was but the one cuss sailing under the name of Deadwood Dick."

"Then you thought wrongly, for I am the original, and a free man. Who this other customer is, I have yet to learn."

"Well, we'll find out, directly, perhaps. Dismount and accept the hospitality of my mess and we'll arrange our plans."

Not long after the defeat and retreat of the outlaws, day dawned upon the little gulch basin, and with its coming came Lew Lyons, bearing the hind quarters of a fine buck-deer upon his shoulders.

Though somewhat suspicious and prejudiced against him, the colonists were glad to welcome the fresh meat, for there was little to eat within the fort, and the fresh juicy venison was tempting in the extreme. Therefore the dark-browed son of Kansas was vouchsafed a more cordial reception than usual.

He, too, seemed in a more amiable mood, and chatted and conversed in altogether a better humor than he had, heretofore.

When questioned as to his movements during his absence he did not vouchsafe much information, merely saying that he had been up in the mountains.

About noon Montague arrived on the northward-bound stage, and brought an additional stock of edibles and ammunition, so that the fort was now pretty well prepared to resist a siege, should there be one.

The day passed swiftly, still no further signs of the outlaws were seen.

Night drew on, and once more settled its shadows over the valley.

And still no perceptible appearance of the enemy.

"I am of the opinion that we've successfully squelched 'em!" old Bill Myers declared, when it came time to turn in. "Anyhow, I don't believe they'll come swoopin around the fort to-night, after ther blizzard they got last night."

"I don't know about that," Montague demurred. "Maybe they calculate we think that, and will be sure to come."

"It won't do no harm to set a guard, at least," Lyons said, it being his first manifestation of interest concerning the safety of the fort.

And so it was decided, Myers and Sing Song being chosen for guard duty during the night.

They accordingly took their stations outside of the cabin, which the tavern-keeper averred was the safest place.

The rest of the colonists then turned in, and were soon asleep, little dreaming that it was a bad move for them, or that their chosen guards would not prove equal to the position.

For be it known, both Myers and his Celestial servant had a particular and indiscreet weakness for the bitters called "bug-juice."

Not only did they hanker after it, but improved each shining moment to gargle their throats with it, when not otherwise busily engaged.

The darkness without the fort was very dense, and its density seemed to cause a thirstiness in the windpipes of the two guards, which gradually increased until Myers was obliged to step over to the tavern after a little brown jug.

On his return he and Sing Song both sampled the contents, and were evidently well satisfied, judging by the way they smacked their lips.

The one sample however seemed but to create a demand for another to "wet up the darkness," and accordingly the twain took frequent potations from the jug. The liquor, instead of being enlivening, seemed to conduce to sleepiness, and before the second jug had been brought over from the Casino, and finished, both Myers and his companion were stretched out upon the ground in a drunken sleep.

Shortly after midnight the door of the fort was cautiously opened, and a head was thrust through the aperture; then, a moment later, the form of Lew Lyons followed suit.

A chuckle escaped him as he noted the points of the situation, principal among which was the condition of the guards.

"Sound asleep, and—hello! here's a couple of jugs, which accounts for it. Ah! things are working finely. The guards are out of the way—the dog is drugged, and now all is in readiness except Deadwood Dick, the second."

"And he is here," a low voice replied, as a man stepped around the corner of the cabin. "Is the coast clear?"

"Perfectly so. All we have to do is to step in and take our game."

"Which may not be so easy as you think for," the outlaw replied. "Where do the girls sleep?"

"Your game sleeps upon a couch in the further end of the cabin. My game also sleeps alone, in a curtained bed, near by."

"Good enough, so far. How about the dog?"

"I drugged him, a bit ago, with a piece of prepared meat. Did you bring the chloroform?"

"No, but I have some ether, which is equally good. Get a light stalk or sapling about ten feet long, that I can fasten a sponge upon."

Lyons softly obeyed, and the outlaw then fastened a large sponge upon the end of it, and soaked the sponge liberally with ether, which he carried in a bottle.

He then removed his boots, and equipped with sponge and pole, followed Lyons into the fort. Within all was dark and silent, the suppressed breathing of the sleepers being the only sounds audible.

Softly the two villains stole toward the couch where Edith Harris slumbered, all unconscious of the danger that threatened her.

When they were but a few yards away, they paused and waited until their eyes had become somewhat accustomed to the gloom; then Deadwood Dick's Double shoved forward the pole so that the sponge was directly in close proximity to Edith's nose.

For several minutes he held it there, and when he finally removed it the poor woman was quite overcome by the powerful drug.

"Lift her and take her outside," he said to Lyons, "and I will see what I can do with the other one. Get far enough from the fort so that in case I give an alarm you can reach the timber with her."

Lyons gently raised Edith in his arms, and bore her cautiously from the building.

Then Deadwood Dick's Double stole across the floor to the curtained bed which Lyons had designated as the sleeping place of Ethel Elliott.

Before parting the curtains, he paused and listened to assure himself that all was right. The regular breathing satisfied him on this score, and he finally parted the curtains and peered in.

Ethel had thrown herself upon the bed without disrobing, and now lay sweetly sleeping with her head resting upon her arm, instead of the pillow. Her face was turned toward the prowling outlaw, and he paused a moment with an inaudible exclamation of admiration.

Then after a moment he shoved the sponge forward beneath her nose, and allowed her to breathe the drug with which it was saturated.

At last he calculated that she was bereft of all power, and removed the sponge, preparatory to carrying her away a helpless victim.

But at this juncture he heard a stir, and peering through the curtain, he saw that Fred St. Celton was up, and was moving toward the open door.

A smothered oath escaped the outlaw, for he saw that unless prevented the young colonist would discover the condition of Myers and the Chinaman and at once give the alarm.

Should he do this, escape would be doubtful and discovery inevitable.

Resolved not to be baffled, when he had the game so nearly in his own hands, the ruffian drew a knife, and glided noiselessly in the wake of Fred St. Celton, his movements alike to those of a cat in the act of pouncing upon a rat.

A single step the young colonist took without the fort—then the murderous knife of the assassin was plunged to the hilt in his back.

With a low groan St. Celton sunk forward to the ground, but to make doubly sure the fatality of his terrible deed, the outlaw leaped upon him, and fastened his bony hands about his neck in a vise-like gripe. Several minutes he remained thus; then arising with a horrible chuckle he softly re-entered the fort, and removed Ethel Elliott from her bed, and bore her out and away into the black night.

The next morning the corpse of poor Fred was found lying partly across the threshold, by the horror-stricken colonists, and upon the floor, near by was a sheet of paper, bearing the following words, in cramped chirography:

"By this time I'll allow that ye'll opine I mean bizness. I've sp'iled another o' yer men, freed my wife, an' hitched onto one o' yer purtiest gals, which ain't had fer one night's work. Mebbe ye'll take my advice and skin out, now, sence ye'll observe that I ain't no slouch on my muscle. Ef ye're gone, pack an' pilgrim, afore sunset, so good, but ef ye persist, prepare ter get took off, one by one. Ye've got several samples. Truly yours,

"DEADWOOD DICK."

CHAPTER XIII.

CONCLUSION.

SHALL we pause to picture the grief and horror of the ill-fated colonists as they gazed upon the inanimate form of the fourth of their party who had fallen a victim to the cruelty of the terrible scourge, Deadwood Dick's Double?

With heavy hearts the mourning colonists raised their stricken companion and bore him within the fort, and endeavored to restore him to life; but it was a hopeless task, which they were finally compelled to give up, and preparations were made for the burial.

Mr. and Mrs. St. Celton were wholly prostrated with grief at this last blow, and obliged to take to their beds, and the remainder of the colonists were more or less affected.

Nothing of old Bill Myers or Sing Song could be seen or found, and what had become of them was destined to remain a mystery, as they were never seen in Cat City Basin again.

Doubtless they had awakened to a realization of what terrible harm their spree had precipitated, and had thought it best to slide out.

Toward noon a party of horsemen were seen entering the gulch by the south gap, and in a few moments they drew rein before the door of the fort.

There were thirteen in all—stanch and stalwart-looking fellows, who looked every inch as if they were born to fight.

The colonists crowded without the door to learn the meaning of their coming.

"Good-morning," the leader of the party said—a wiry little fellow with iron-gray hair and mustache, and a keen eye. "I am John Webb, sheriff of this county, and hearing that you were in trouble, I thought I'd ride over with my posse, and see if I could extend you any assistance."

"For which I thank you in behalf of myself and companions. We have been troubled much since coming here, and last night an additional blow was struck by the accursed outlaw and ruffian, Deadwood Dick."

"Hold! you err there!" Webb declared, quickly. "The man who calls himself Deadwood Dick, in this gulch, is an impostor, as has been proven to my satisfaction. This man, at my right, here, is the original character of that title."

And as he spoke he pointed to the handsome knight of the saddle, who formed one of his company.

"Ah! say you so? Then the woman was right," the Judge said, turning to his party. "If this is the original Deadwood Dick, I wish to apologize for the trouble we have made his wife, under the belief that she was the wife of the gulch outlaw."

"None is needed, if you treated her respectfully, as a prisoner of war," Deadwood Dick said. "This Double of mine has caused you serious trouble, and you were perhaps right in holding my noble little wife. But, now that you have been satisfied on that point, I trust you will be willing to yield her to my possession."

"Willing I would be, sir, if it were within my power, but it is not," the Judge said. And then he related how they had found Fred St. Celton's corpse, and how the papers of the bogus Deadwood Dick had explained the abduction of Ethel and Edith.

Both Deadwood Dick and the sheriff listened with stern faces and flashing eyes, and when the Judge had finished his recital, the officer tightened his belt, suggestively.

"The ruffian has run nearly to the end of his rope!" he said, gravely. "If you will furnish a couple of men or so, I will lead an immediate attack upon these outlaws, and rescue the women or fall in the attempt!"

"Ay! we'll do that very thing," Deadwood Dick assented. "If we boldly attack the wretches it won't take long to wipe them out."

Montague, the two Warwicks, and Lige Hanson at once volunteered to go, and bringing forth their horses they mounted, ready for the attack.

Then brave John Webb, known throughout all the Colorado as a fearless officer, led a charge down into the basin—into the forest, and to the very outlaws' camp.

Gathered outside were the followers of the counterfeit Deadwood Dick, with drawn weapons, and no sooner did the sheriff's posse pour into the glade than they were greeted by a deadly volley.

Fortunately, however, not a man was disabled, and the next instant they returned the salute deliberately and with withering effect, every bullet counting a disabling injury or a death.

But a handful of the outlaws now remained, and with Lew Lyons at their head they attempted to rally, but the sheriff and his men dashed forward and cut them down without quarter, till not an able outlaw remained standing.

Short and decisive had been the battle, and it had resulted most victoriously in the favor of the right.

The bodies were gathered together, but nothing of Deadwood Dick's Double could be found.

A search of the cabin resulted in the finding of Ethel Elliott, unharmed, and she stated that the outlaw chief had only a few moments before taken his flight, with Edith Harris in his power.

Directing the sheriff to return to the fort, Deadwood Dick mounted his horse and rode rapidly away through the forest, declaring it his intention to pursue, overtake, and capture the outlaw.

John Webb and his men returned to the fort, Montague, of course, escorting Ethel.

Their coming was warmly greeted, and it was with a sigh of relief that the colonists heard of the breaking up of the terrible band that had caused them so much harm.

Shortly afterward the sheriff dispatched the captured outlaws who had not been killed to Fairplay, under charge of a part of his men, he with the balance remaining to learn of Deadwood Dick's success in capturing his "double."

At sunset poor Fred St. Celton was buried not far from the grave of his old companion, Royce Elliott, and sorrowing friends watched his remains laid forever away from the sight of man.

Just at dusk a little party upon horseback rode into the basin through the northern gap, and drew rein before the fort, and proved to be Deadwood Dick, Edith, Chris Carleton, and—shall we relate it?—Royce Elliott, alive and well!

Wild exclamations of surprise and wonder came from the colonists at sight of their supposed dead companions, and rising in his stirrups, Deadwood Dick motioned them to be silent; whereupon he spoke.

"If you will permit me," he said, "I will explain. Mr. Elliott is alive and well, as you see. After you had buried him, I took the liberty to resurrect him, and by administering proper remedies, succeeded in restoring him to life. I then enlisted him in my service until this gang of outlaws should be destroyed, and we manufactured the ghost business with the aid of simulation, white robes and plenty of phosphorus. I now surrender him to you, alive and well. Also, to Captain Webb I hand over my prisoner, here—Chris Carleton, *alias* the bogus Deadwood Dick. Let the law punish him as he deserves. Now, having tendered you this explanation, I will beg to leave my wife in your care a few days, while I am off on private business in the North."

Edith was warmly welcomed, as was the returned Royce Elliott, and after many thanks had been lavished upon Deadwood Dick, he was permitted to take his departure.

The next morning Sheriff Webb and his men set out for Fairplay with their prisoner, but their absence was shortly after made good by the reappearance of Slippery Sal.

A week pleasantly passed at the fort, and as there were no outlaws to hinder them, the colonists got to work, and activity soon teemed every where throughout the gulch basin.

Weeks flew by; paying gold was struck; shanties dotted the valley everywhere, and one night Ethel and Montague celebrated their nuptials, midst the best wishes of many warm friends. And the Judge, who had been vigorously sparking Slippery Sal for some time, found opportunity on this occasion to draw her aside and propose immediate union.

And shall we record the answer?

Off came the blonde wig, and on went a long-haired black one, and a false mustache and imperial, and as Deadwood Dick stepped forward and encircled Edith's waist with his arm, he gave the Judge his answer:

"I highly appreciate your offer, friend Elliott," he said, "but, as you perceive, I am not at liberty!"

THE END.

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